Geometry for Ocelots

exurb1a

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For my mum, dad, and sister

Biographer’s Note -

To those who might find this work, I ask only you remember that we lived, and the world was once just as real and immediate for us as it is for you now.

Hear our whispers from down the vistas of history. Know the mirror, know the mirror, know the mirror. . .

Ursula II
Gearheart University, Gearheart
Eight-ninths Bivnik

I

Many maintain that the best conjuring illusions are the ones we never discover the trick behind. They are remarkable, certainly.

More incredible though are those illusions we discover the trick behind, and come to find the trick even more enchanting than the illusion itself.

Such is the world.

Welcome.

- Excerpts from **The Metaphysical Sutras of Lord Anaximander**

1.

The only noble desire is for the end of desire. Few are brave enough to admit this.

Look to the ancient battlefields, to the corpses fallen by sword, by musket, by theta-beam.

Did the generals who prevailed in those battles take their spoils and retire to some mountain hut, and live the remainder of their days in the quiet shade?

For sure not. They made more war.

Look to the ancient heavens, full of starships and space-bending; whole solar systems repurposed as divine machinery.

Did the engineers who birthed those miracles watch matter Itself roll over and beg for mercy, and concede they had done enough?

For sure not. They built more machines.

So too with the poet who wants only for one perfect line, apprehends it, and is more miserable than ever.

So too with the great master who levitates over the black oceans, only to reach the coast and turn back around to do it once more.

So too with the drunk who swears off drink by morning, and is found ratted again then by lunch.

The only noble desire is for the end of desire.

Few are brave enough to admit this.

2.

We begin at the end of history.

There to the east of the galaxy lay the dreaming worlds, where folk meditated all day on perfect compassion.

There to the west of the galaxy lay the rational worlds, the homes of science and geometry.

To the north, the Meta-cluster, where no one died nor fled from life.

To the south, the moons of bliss.

And out yet further, to the suburbs of heaven—an old yellow star around which span an old blue-green world.

Upon that old world, atop a towering mountain, lay the temple of Venerable Lord Mriga.

The temple appeared a great and upturned sparkling chandelier, and its thousand crystal spires were high enough to kiss the shallows of space.

At the tip of each spire sat a Deva master upon a prayer mat; cows and horses, wasps and squid, all robed in holy blue cloth, and with holy blue dye upon their foreheads; their eyes closed, their minds turned inwards on the central jewel of Is.

The festival of Sangha had begun.

Scholars and masters from all across the Devan Union were invited to the temple to participate in the festival of Sangha and share their insights on the quest to attain Nibbana. Over the course of the week, Devas from distant worlds could be seen arriving out of the air in gilded carriages pulled by gilded beasts.

It was just after dawn when from the air stepped Venerable Lady Ursula, the great Devan physicist. She presented as a brown bear and sported a spherical, floating machine called a spyle at her side.

Masters and initiates alike prostrated before Ursula, muttering holy chants.

Seers and scholars alike levitated above her, crying thanks to Anaximander for her safe passage across space.

Ursula shifted from foot to foot, said, “Okay, yes, thanks.”

She spent several hours wandering aimlessly about the grounds of the temple. Being not only one of the founders of the great Devan Union, but also famous for her work in the dimensional sciences, many academics began to approach Ursula to tell of their own accomplishments.

A metaphysician reported that the sentient matter project was but a century from completion.

A musician reported that the three chords of perfect compassion had been isolated, and he was constructing a great machine by which to broadcast them across the galaxy for the rest of time.

An artist reported that Ursula was very beautiful, and would she like to discuss ‘aesthetic matters’ together in private?

Ursula politely declined and went looking for a spot to drink alone.

3.

Ursula was summoned by parchment to Lord Mriga’s greeting chamber. She attended with Madeleine, her spyle.

The greeting chamber was bare save for a floor-table, cushions, and a golden effigy of Lord Anaximander. He was depicted in his youth, sat in full lotus position, peacefully gazing to his meta-yes above.

Ursula stood at Lord Mriga’s balcony a long while watching the forest. It extended almost to the horizon. Wisps of smoke were just visible beyond, no doubt from a native village.

She turned about to find Lord Mriga had materialised. He presented as a tall, nimble deer. His irises were hexagonal and perfectly black. His antlers were draped in many silver chains and loops of silk, and his robe was the typical Devan blue, though speckled at the hem with golden embroidery.

They bowed to one another.

“My lady,” Mriga said. “It has been too long.”

Ten centuries thanks to you. . . Ursula thought. “My lord, greetings.”

Mriga produced a holy necklace from his robe to commemorate the opening of the festival of Sangha, bearing the thing in his mouth. Ursula took the necklace ceremoniously and put it over her furry head.

They both sat in full lotus at the floor-table. Nodding to Madeleine the spyle, Mriga said, “Does that belong to you?”

“She is my companion, yes.”

Madeleine glowed the greeting colour of orange and span joyously clockwise.

Mriga said, “On this world spyles are wild, considered among the rank of animals. Lower sometimes.”

Ursula whispered to Madeleine, “I’m sorry darling, do you think you could leave us alone for a little while?”

Madeleine glowed blue in the affirmative and exited out the window.

Mriga bowed once again. “My lady, your attendance at the festival is a great honour. Was the journey arduous?”

“Not at all. It was necessary to stop every few days on stepping-stone planets of course, a pleasure to see the Devan Union properly after so many years at my desk on Gearheart.”

“Sublime. And what do you make of my world?”

My world, Ursula echoed in her mind. *The cheek. . .* She said, “Bountiful in the extreme, and your palace is fit for Lord Anaximander himself.” Coyly she added, “I noticed smoke on the horizon. Do natives live on your world also?”

“Many thousands, yes. They assist us with the production of the holy flower. Do you keep natives on Gearheart?”

“Not so much *keep*, my lord. Many of them are scholars at my university. Friends also.”

Mriga blinked his onyx eyes, ignored this. “What news is there from Gearheart University?”

“Our metaphysicians have been making excellent progress in geometry, a number of old paradoxes are resolved. Our theoreticians have made fine strides in dimensional physics.”

“And what of Gearheart’s spiritual progress?”

Careful, Ursula thought. “My lord, you know Gearheart is not a terribly spiritual place, I’m afraid. . .”

A long pause, then Mriga murmured, “So I am told. Well, perhaps that can be balanced against your scientific prowess. Is it still your intention to provide us with an overview of your academic work at the opening of the festival today?”

“Anaximander willing, yes my lord.”

“Very well. I trust the talk will not touch on your old conspiracy theories.”

Tread gently, bear. . . “I am not sure what you mean, my lord.”

“Perhaps you might give me a small summary of your work now in advance.”

“It is a little technical and dull. . .”

Mriga said formally, “All speakers are expected to brief me on the nature of their work prior to their Sangha lectures. There are no exceptions. We will conduct this discussion further in vexspeech. I know you and your Gearheart colleagues prefer the primitive tongue, but I find it rather limiting with regards to abstract matters.”

Before Ursula could protest, Mriga struck a ceremony bell with his antlers. Initiates entered bearing urns. From the urns plumed the purple smoke of the holy Devan flower, moksha. The initiates circled the two masters until the moksha smoke was so thick one could only see a few feet ahead.

Ursula and Mriga breathed in deeply through their mouths, exhaled through their noses, repeating over and over the primary chant of being: *Eema. . .eema. . .eema. . .*

Fifty repetitions and they slouched, their highminds full of moksha. They had transcended the three-dimensional realm of Samsara and entered mentally into that four-dimensional space, Vex.

New grammar was available.

Madam, came Lord Mriga’s vextones, his voice originating from behind and ahead. *An honour. An honour to have you. Here. This location. But.* **Necessary admonishment follows. I, a high lord, you a scholar. Pay me deference due.**

Yes, my lord, Ursula intoned. *Yes, my lord.* **I pay deference due to you.**

The festival talks begin in but a few hours, Mriga said. *They will take place in the Golden Atrium.* **I host this festival and I am master of this world. Deference due.** *I desire assurance that you will not be peddling your aberrant brand of cynicism inside my temple. Please outline the proposal of your talk.*

Very well, sir, Ursula said. **Though I simplify, I simplify.** *I have worked with the great mathematician Lord Lepus for many centuries at Gearheart University. Our query was one of what would happen if the*

Devan Union continues to push out into the galaxy, colonising worlds at its current rate. Based on our recent calculations—

Madam, Mriga said. **Unconcealed irritation.** *You have been disinvited from the festival for the last thousand years on account of the very madness you preach at me now. You assured me in writing you would not be presenting unfounded hypotheses if you were invited once again.*

Just a moment, my lord, Ursula said. **Attempt to appear objective, for I am being objective.** *Please just hear the full shape of the thesis before you dismiss it. Based on even our most liberal calculations, all primary galactic resources will be depleted inside of a thousand years if we continue spreading across the galaxy as we are now. This depletion constant is likely built into any expanding civilisation. Lord Lepus and I call it the bivnik effect.* **Sincere suggestion.** *We believe the people of the Devan Union should be made aware of the pressing nature of this thing. So far we have largely been ignored by the Golden Council. And by yourself, of course.*

For good reason, Mriga said. **Rhetorical inquiry.** *You wish to scare our guests? The festival of Sangha is held in honour of the enlightenment of the Golden One Lord Anaximander, to discuss how we might follow him to Nibbana. This is no place to monger fear.*

My lord, Ursula said. *There will be no reaching Nibbana if the Devan Union collapses.*

My lady, Mriga said. *Here we strive for transcendence, not regression. You were invited with the explicit request of talking on the development of jhanamoksha. That is what our Devan brothers and sisters wish to hear.*

Ursula said, *I understand. However, our bivnik calculations are conclusive, even indisputable if I may say so.* **For I do say so. For I did. Just then. In the moment trailing yet unattainably close behind us now as moments always do. . .**

Mriga's eyes grew wide and high and expanded along the fourth-dimensional axis. He towered over Ursula, his presence now set within a fury of bent light and fractal echoes. He said, *Madam, there is data for proving many things. And I am no stranger to the bivnik effect, as you call it.* **I am learned. More learned than you in all areas of inquiry that matter.** *I am fully aware of the approaching calamity, do you think me so stupid? But you do not consider the social implications of your actions, you never have. All you will achieve is to frighten the herd.*

Ursula said, *Herd, my lord?*

Mriga said, *Herd, madam.* **So I say in this place of knowing where there is only truth and sentimental things have washed off us like water on dry dirt long ago.** *There is a galactic resource crisis approaching; I do not doubt this. But it will not be solved with your petty scare-myths. We must innovate our way out, with technology, with power, with jhanamoksha.*

Ursula said, *Technology? What technology could stand up to greed? The Gearheart data are data. We must moderate, no good or evil about it. My lord, I am a scientist, I am not here to scare or—*

Mriga put up a hoof for silence. His eyes grew somehow blacker; anti-light, absolute no-thing. He said, *And I am a philosopher. And I am the warden of this world. And I am a vital, indispensable icon of the Devan faith, clothed in immense wisdom and potency. I demand that you do not scare our guests at the festival. Jhanamoksha is the only solution to this crisis. Today you will talk on jhanamoksha and nothing else.*

Ursula opened her mouth, closed it again.

Mriga bowed.

Ursula bowed.

They returned to Samsara, to three-dimensional space.

Lord Mriga struck the ceremony bell again. Two serving tigers entered bearing plates upon their backs, delivered the plates to the table, and exited silently.

The meals were identical, purple fillets of meat. “A delicacy of my world,” Mriga said. “Moksha-infused beef. Come, let us fill our bellies and celebrate your honoured visit to the festival.”

Ursula twiddled a clump of her fur. “Apologies my lord, but I follow the vegetarian precepts.”

“For this I recommend you make an exception. There is no meat finer in the Union. Its consumption will confer spiritual qualities, I guarantee.”

Mriga began on his plate, snarling, gnashing, blood squirting from the meat and leaving red spots about the floor.

Ursula examined her portion.

The flesh was fresh. And, judging by its texture, of livestock not more than a few years old.

4.

Ursula descended from the holy mountain and made into the great forest below, her thoughts muddled. Madeleine the spyle floated silently behind, stopping to examine the foliage of this new world.

A single moon was rising to the east, even in daylight. Alien birds chirped.

All worlds smelled different. This one was soil after rain.

Ursula wandered randomly, across rivers, over bogs. At last she came upon a lake. She sat on the bank of the lake and hurriedly looked over her lecture notes.

If she could not talk about the bivnik effect, there was little else to bring up that would interest anyone.

If she could not talk about the bivnik effect, it might not be too long before there was no one left to interest anyway.

Lepus, she thought. *I wish you were here.*

5.

So it was then a native man came stepping through the trees. His name was Johannes. He had wild blonde hair down to his shoulders and wore nothing but ripped shorts and a satchel. He foraged about a while in the reeds of the lake, looking for mushrooms and collecting them in his satchel.

Through the trees he sighted a brown bear. It was sitting on the bank of the lake. It wore the traditional blue robe of a Deva, and some kind of white, spherical object hovered at its side.

After a few moments the bear caught sight of Johannes. The bear cocked its head, approached.

Johannes fell to his knees and prostrated in the dirt. He said, “Venerable one, on behalf of the ancestors, I honour you.”

“Okay, thank you,” the bear said in a woman’s voice.

“Venerable one, on behalf of the village children, I honour you.”

The bear nodded. “That’s very kind.”

“Venerable one—”

“Please stop saying venerable one.”

Johannes peeked up. The bear offered a huge brown paw. Johannes accepted it and stood to his feet.

He had never been so close to a Deva. He saw that the bear’s irises were burning blue and hexagonal. He could smell her; cinnamon, cardamom, and many other spices he did not recognise.

“What are you doing here?” the bear said.

“I’m sorry,” Johannes said meekly. “If this is Deva territory, I did not know it, I only—”

The bear said firmly, “Would you stop that? It’s a lake. No one owns lakes. I’m just making conversation.”

Slowly Johannes said, “I’m collecting mushrooms.”

“May I try one?”

Johannes offered his satchel. The bear put a mushroom to her mouth, nibbled, and tried to hide her obvious distaste. She extended a paw. “My name is Ursula.”

Johannes bowed. “Venerable one—”

Gently the bear lifted his head back up. She took his hand and put it in her paw and shook. She said, “Please don’t call me venerable one. We’ve talked about this.”

He nodded. “My name is Johannes.”

The floating sphere approached Johannes. He stepped back fearfully, but the bear said, “No, it’s all right, this is my friend. Her name is Madeleine.”

The sphere fell apart into dust, and the dust became an outstretched hand. Slowly Johannes met it with his own hand and shook.

A silence endured, the bear towering, the native trying not to cower. Finally the bear said, “Do you live nearby, Johannes?”

“Yes, a village a mile that way, called Hisarya.”

“Are there many of you?”

“Perhaps a few hundred. We farm moksha.”

The bear appeared to be waiting for a question from Johannes in return. None came and so the bear said, “This is a good place to come and think,

isn’t it?” Johannes nodded. “I have to give a talk to many Devas in a few hours. If I am honest about some matters, it will be a problem. If I am not honest then it will be an even bigger problem. What do you think I should do?”

Is this a test? Johannes wondered. *Am I under suspicion for something? I have worked hard all winter. What could I be guilty of?* He said cautiously, “The edicts say that it is always better to be honest.”

The bear considered this, nodded. “I think you are right. Thank you.”

This is *a test,* he thought. *I have angered the gods somehow. I must absolve.*

Ursula raised an eyebrow. “Wait, what are the *edicts*?”

Uncertainly Johannes said, “The native-Devan edicts.” He thought, *Edict Seven: “Unless one is a village chief or peace keeper, no native shall engage in direct contact with a Deva.” I am already bound for punishment. I must submit an offering. It is my last hope.*

Johannes took a red and white thread bracelet from his satchel. “My village wear these to celebrate the coming of spring.” He held the bracelet out. “May I?”

The bear presented her trunk of a wrist. Johannes tied the bracelet on and the bear admired it. “I’m sorry Johannes, I’m not from Earth. I don’t know the custom.”

He stuttered, “When the first stork of spring is sighted, you can tie the bracelet to a branch.” Then quickly he added, “But it is not compulsory.”

“That is a very pleasant tradition.” She stared down at him, smiling, her irises hexagonal and bluer than day.

There came the distant blare of a horn. The bear said apologetically, “Well, I should go. Thank you for the advice, Johannes. Have a safe journey back to your village.”

Johannes made to bow, but Ursula stopped him politely with a paw and shook his hand once again.

Then she turned about to the sacred east and walked noiselessly into the air.

6.

Johannes returned to the village and told no one of his encounter with Ursula the Deva bear.

Little purple moksha flowers bloomed all about the village's perimeter. The moksha harvest deadline was only three days away now, and from sunrise to evening the fields were alive with villagefolk picking and gathering.

Given the poisonous nature of the moksha flowers, it was necessary that all farmers wore a breather mask and overalls while working. Even so, the smell of moksha crept in through the mask occasionally, something close to spiced vanilla.

Stories of moksha-folly were told across the farmers' history, of folk whose masks had fallen off by negligence.

So the stories went that by the time another farmer reached him, the fool was either lying in the moksha with his eyes wide open, or crying with laughter, or screaming in delight, or dead.

7.

At the exact middle of the temple of Venerable Lord Mriga was the Golden Atrium. Many hundreds of Devas shuffled in, rolled out prayer mats, and sat in full lotus, their blue robes bunched about their paws and hooves.

A bell rang out and several temple initiates entered bearing urns of billowing moksha incense. The purple smoke soon filled the hall.

The crowd breathed as one, filling their lungs with the bitter tickle of moksha.

Eema. . . Eema. . . they chanted in unison, invoking the doctrine of Is.

Beneath closed, meditative eyes, their irises warped yet more hexagonal.

The initiates exited. The moksha dispersed.

Space lensed a moment and Lord Mriga appeared on a jade dais before the crowd. He bowed and the crowd bowed in response.

His voice reverberated about the hall. “Great sages and seers, I am deeply honoured by your presence. In accordance with the ancient tradition, on this, the opening day of Sangha, we are to enjoy several lectures from the greatest minds in Samsara. Our first speaker is a visiting scientist from, and dean of, Gearheart University. I’m sure many of you are familiar with her work. May I present Venerable Scholar Ursula.”

Space lensed again on the dais. Lord Mriga was gone, replaced with Ursula and Madeleine the spyle then.

“Masters.” Ursula bowed to the audience. “It is a sublime delight to be with you today. As Lord Mriga reported, I arrived only this morning from the world of Gearheart.”

She directed a hand gesture at Madeleine. Madeleine morphed into a replica of a skyline, punctuated by a frantic sea of domes and spires.

“For those unaware, Gearheart is a scholar’s world several weeks’ vexflight from here. I hope it is not immodest to say it sports some of the finest scientific facilities and thinkers in the world. Its construction was originally commissioned around two thousand years ago by the Golden One Lord Anaximander himself. Its mission today is no different to that during the Sacred Period. Namely, to unmask the workings of the world.”

Ursula surveyed the crowd and found with little surprise that many eyes were vacant already. She thought of Johannes the human native, that same dim light of incuriousness about him.

Ursula continued, “Learned lords, it is the goal of all living creatures to attain transcendence. Life is but the conquest of dimensionality. Our great union, of course, strains for that ultimate transcendence the Golden One achieved millennia ago: Nibbana.” A few gazes returned to attention. “Now, we do not know exactly what method the Golden One used to ascend to Nibbana, the sutras are vague. I’m sure plenty of our yogis and masters of mantra here today believe it was by the Golden One’s will and practice alone. This is of course possible. Many other scholars believe it may have been via a super-enhanced strain of moksha capable of expanding one’s mind into realms of space and thought quite unimaginable to us, *jhanamoksha*.”

She spotted Lord Mriga at the back of the hall, his black eyes staring without expression. She raised a paw to express significance. “However,” she said, “at Gearheart University we take a somewhat different approach.

Though it is neither explicitly recorded how Lord Anaximander attained Nibbana, nor what Nibbana was like, it *is* stated that he became free from want, and threw off the shackles of clinging. To me this doesn't sound like a new strain of moksha, or a victory via meditation. Rather, Lord Anaximander seems to have *given up* the quest for the attainment of transcendence. He became content with his lot."

A long silence. Then a shout from the back: "But why did the Golden One invite us to ascend to Nibbana if it's so dull?"

"Because he foresaw that the only way to attain the infinite is to surrender to it. He saw he was an expression *of* the infinite, as we all are."

Shall I do this? Ursula wondered. Once again she caught Mriga's nothing-eyes and his gaze bore deep into her. *Oh to hell with it. Be with me in spirit, Lepus.*

"My lords, I believe Lord Anaximander was attempting to tell us something about sociology, not theology." Another hand gesture and Madeleine split into a frenzy of swirling orbs. "These are the million worlds of the Devan Union. Each year the Union colonies push further and further out into space. The process is exponential of course. As more worlds are settled, more settlers can be dispatched from those worlds for new worlds. The mathematician Lord Lepus and I became rather curious regarding what should happen if this process continues at its current rate, harvesting worlds and stars with full abandon." Mriga began trotting urgently towards the stage. Ursula gabbled, "We predict total galactic collapse within a thousand years if this rate of expansion is maintained."

A gasp, cries of indignation, then low muttering abounded. Ursula raised her voice. "Our papers have been in circulation for many centuries; we ask only that you assess them for the merit of their calculations. Galactic resources are not infinite, and failure to recognise that will result in mass-scale catastrophe. Masters, this is the certain endpoint of what we call *the bivnik effect*."

Mriga materialised suddenly beside Ursula on the dais. He struck the ceremony bell, called out, "My lords, please do not alarm yourselves. Venerable Scholar Ursula's theoretics are but a model. I speak as one versed in these matters myself."

Someone shouted, "What are we to do?"

Ursula said, “We should rein in galactic expansion immediately, lest the process soon run out of control.”

“*Madam*,” Mriga snapped.

A theosophical argument broke out at the front of the crowd; chatter from the middle.

Pelicans stood to their feet. Snakes uncoiled and rose. Someone threw open the main door and initiates peered nervously in on the commotion.

Mriga expanded his body across all axes, towering suddenly over the audience in threespace and four, in Samsara and Vex.

The muttering quieted. Eyes melted from alarm to sober attention.

Mriga said, “Masters, let us not lose our heads before the banquet. Once again, Lady Ursula is a theorist, and as much as theory is essential for the climb towards Nibbana, theoretics is more an intellectual sport than a science.” Ursula tried to interject, but Mriga raised his voice above hers. “In the afternoon we will welcome three more scholars to the stage to talk on theological matters. We shall be nourished by their wisdom as we are now by Lady Ursula and her mathematical imaginings.”

Ursula said, “All right, but—”

Mriga raised a gold-speckled hoof. “*Eema*,” he sang, invoking the holy mantra.

The crowd prostrated before him. “*Eema*,” they sang.

Within the mantra was the meaning of the world and the emptiness of the world also.

Within the mantra was the promise to attain full ascendance as the Golden One had.

It was love and contempt and distance and width; the unconditional declaration that consciousness was but one floating branch caught in the great river of becoming, rushed in rapturous ecstasy towards a final, perfect meta-yes.

“*Eema*,” Ursula muttered and searched her robe for cigarettes.

8.

Below the great temple, amid the great valley, in the village of Hisarya, the moksha harvest was almost complete.

Soon would be the party days, but that evening many of the villagefolk were tired and trudged off to their beds.

Johannes was not so tired. He collected the whisky bottle from his yurt and made to his favourite oak tree and climbed to the highest branch. The night was clear and the stars were out in their millions, swaddled in the dust of the Milky Way.

A rustle. Johannes turned about. An enormous brown bear was perched on a branch behind.

Johannes yelled in shock and almost fell out of the tree.

The bear raised pleading paws the size of frying pans. “It’s fine, it’s me, it’s Ursula,” she said.

Johannes caught his breath and bowed, limbs shaking.

The bear appeared no different from their first visit, wearing the same blue robe, sporting the same burning, hexagonal blue irises.

The bear glanced at the whisky bottle. Johannes offered it uncertainly. The bear took a sip, then several huge glugs. She wiped her mouth and said, “Now that’s a lot better than your lake mushrooms, hot damn.”

She passed the bottle back and Johannes thought how strange it was that a goddess’ saliva lay on the bottle’s rim now.

Ursula lit a cigarette. She said, “Well, I tried your approach of honesty in my lecture.” She waited for Johannes to follow with a question, but he only stared. “It didn’t go great.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” She studied his face via the light of the moon. She said, “You know, we have native humans like you on my world too. Only, they aren’t just farmers.”

“Aren’t just farmers. . .” Johannes echoed

“No. Some are scientists, some are artists, some are politicians.”

“Politicians. . .”

She waited again for a spark of curiosity. Nothing. She said, “Your hand please.” Johannes presented it. Ursula removed her holy necklace and placed it in his palm. From the necklace hung a glass-looking charm;

spherical at first, then a cube, then a pyramid, morphing tirelessly. Johannes' mouth fell open.

Ursula said, "Thank you for your bracelet to welcome the spring. Here is my gift to you then. My people are also celebrating an occasion, hence my visit to this world. It is called the festival of Sangha. We wear these to honour it." Then, to test his curiosity: "We celebrate the festival every one hundred years. I have celebrated it personally eleven times now."

Johannes said, "Mm."

A shooting star streaked out over the west.

Ursula nodded to its wake and said, "Do you know what those are?" Johannes shook his head. "Well, do you have schools here?"

"Yes."

"What do they teach you about shooting stars?"

"Nothing. We learn to farm and care for the land, and some of us to read and write too."

"Well, would you like to know a little about the sky?"

"Mm. . ."

Ursula explained that stars were in fact very large balls of gas, much larger than the world, and that *shooting* stars were not really stars at all.

She explained there were more worlds in the heavens than every grain of sand on every beach of Earth combined, and that the distances between each world were further than Johannes could walk in a billion lifetimes.

She explained, in little terms, the shape of the unfathomable Is.

"Okay," Johannes said.

9.

For a week Johannes returned to the oak tree each night, but the Deva bear was not there.

In his bed, just before sleeping, he stared for a long time at the necklace charm the bear had given him.

It contained no moving parts. It did not slow or need rest. If he kept the charm tight in his grip as it morphed, it only pushed his hand back to

reshape itself with a firmness always slightly stronger than his grip.

It was pleasant to watch, like the stars.

And, like the stars, it required no explanation.

10.

Out one evening on a walk near the village boundary, Johannes heard powerful footfall behind. It was Ursula and her floating white sphere.

Ursula was dressed not in her usual blue robe, but a purple dress, and with a rucksack on her back.

“Venerable one, an honour,” Ursula said and bowed to Johannes. Johannes smiled uncertainly and had no joke to reciprocate with. “I thought we could take a walk and maybe talk some more about cosmic things.”

“All right,” Johannes said.

Ursula led and when they reached the village boundary, Johannes paused. “It’s not allowed,” he said.

“It’s fine. You’re with a Deva.”

Still he hesitated. Ursula stepped over the boundary and held out a paw. She said, “Venerable one, there are wondrous things to see, but they shall only make themselves apparent to those brave enough to go adventuring. Besides, I’ve got wine and fancy glasses.”

Reluctantly Johannes took her paw and stepped over the village boundary for the first time in his life.

The ground quickly became alien as they walked, no sign of crops nor moksha.

Ursula led them into a forest and much twittering and clacking came from the trees, and when Johannes stopped here and there in nervousness, Ursula only took his hand again and gently pulled him on.

At last they emerged from the forest upon a cliff—a great churning river below.

Ursula brought a blanket from her rucksack and laid it out upon the cliff. She sat and beckoned that Johannes do the same. Next, she brought out wine and glasses and poured. She clinked their glasses together in some

strange custom Johannes did not know. Johannes seemed to be allowed to drink then and he drank.

He took a small survey of the horizon and noticed a collection of curious jagged shapes to the east, across the river; all spires and needle towers, more organic than constructed, improving on Nature's aesthetic rather than standing in defiance of Her.

Following his gaze, Ursula said, "They're buildings."

"Temples?" Johannes asked.

"No, not temples. A city, from before the Devan eras." With care she added, "Native men and women lived in it. There are the remains of the cities of men and women all across the Devan Union."

Johannes' eyes alternated between Ursula and the city; Ursula to check she was being truthful, the city to check it stayed in existence. He said, "Men and women. Like those in my village."

"That's right."

Ursula's sphere came soaring up from the cliff, dragging an object behind in a field of dust. The sphere laid the object at their feet. Ursula said, "Well now, Madeleine has found something."

Johannes saw the object was metal and engraved with many unfamiliar lines and glyphs—hints of miniature mechanisms on the underside. "A machine," he murmured.

"A machine, yes," Ursula said. "This is one of the shooting stars we saw up in your tree. Lots of these sorts of devices were put in the sky many thousands of years ago so folk could communicate across great distances. No one cares for them now and they fall back to the ground." She turned her hexagonal eyes directly on Johannes. "And the machines were not built and put there by the Devas, but by men and women. By your ancestors. Same as that city across the water."

Johannes stared. "Men and women. . ." he muttered.

"Men and women, like those in your village. Long before the Devas."

There was no shelf to lay the idea on. Much like the little necklace charm, this new thought changed shape every time he almost had it in his grip.

Devas made natives.

Natives lived before Devas.

Men and women, like those in my village. . .

The little sphere span about and glowed purple. Ursula reported, “Madeleine says she is very pleased to meet you, and that she’d like you to keep the shooting star as a gift. I think tonight we’ll bury it here. If you ever want to remember what clever things your ancestors did, you can come back to this place anytime you like and dig it up.”

Johannes only frowned in confusion.

Ursula and Johannes finished the wine and watched the stars in silence a while. Then Johannes laid back on the blanket and before long he was snoring.

Ursula whispered to Madeleine, “Darling, I wonder why the humans on this world don’t ask questions.”

Madeleine span about a few times, clockwise, diagonal, cyan and gold: *I doubt we’d like to find out.*

11.

The harvest was complete. The natives left the bales of moksha on a great pedestal to the south of the village. The next morning and the bales were gone, removed by Devan forces unseen, and a satisfied calm descended on the villagefolk.

So came Children’s Day then.

Chief Eno lit a fire at the centre of the village and gathered the villagefolk before him.

He was only fifty, though with a face of pocks and wrinkles, leaning always on a walking stick of newmetal.

He gave a short speech thanking the village for its hard work, commending the children, farmers, and elders.

The beer kegs were wheeled out. Chief Eno took the first sip and declared the beer was fine. The drinking began with no modesty.

Johannes stood at the back of the crowd and drank alone. He was not sleeping well. It felt as though a tap had been left running in the upstairs of his mind.

The festivities continued through the afternoon and into the evening. The villagefolk ate vine sarmi, then gathered the three chosen children together. Two women played violinidas and folk danced about the chosen children, holding hands and singing the farewell hymns.

Having had his fill of celebrating, Johannes fetched the whisky from his yurt and hiked out to the oak tree, climbing up to observe the evening from above.

“Hi,” Ursula said. Despite her great bear bulk, she sat waiting on a branch barely capable of supporting a cat. Johannes passed the whisky and Ursula took a sip.

Below them, the Children’s Day dance had dissipated into little drunken cliques. The parents of the chosen children were adorned with garlands of flowers and many folk came to bow to them.

“What’s all this about?” Ursula said.

“It’s Children’s Day,” Johannes said.

They drained the whisky bottle easily and for the first time Johannes felt at home in the bear’s presence.

A flurry of blue light shot up from beyond the moksha fields. It resolved into a deer, one hoof raised above its head.

Quickly the villagefolk assembled into a congregation and moved to the west boundary, the three chosen children leading.

“No really, what’s all this about?” Ursula asked.

Johannes said, “It’s *Children’s Day*.”

“What does that mean?”

“The children will be taken to the temple of Venerable Lord Mriga tonight.”

The congregation waited at the village boundary and all were silent.

Out of the dark came a tiger and an elephant. They wore the traditional blue Devan robes, and atop their heads were crowns of dancing blue fire.

The villagefolk bowed. The parents of the chosen children prostrated on their bellies and the children drew forward to join the Devas. The tiger and the elephant knelt, and the children climbed onto their backs.

The blue sigil of the deer exploded over the fields once again, though this time its head was bowed and solemn as though expressing gratitude.

The villagefolk chanted in unison and Johannes joined in under his breath.

We commit our young to the great never-death, devoted now in perpetual service of Lord Mriga.

His eyes see beyond sight.

His wisdom reaches beyond knowledge.

All glory to He.

The tiger and the elephant stood and turned about and made into the dark with the children on their backs.

The villagefolk returned to the fire and resumed drinking and dancing, taking special care to congratulate and praise the parents of the departed children.

Ursula said quietly, “I would like you to tell me everything you know about what just happened.” Johannes stared dumb. “I told you, I’m new here, Johannes. I come from very far away.”

Uncertainly Johannes said, “At the end of every harvest cycle, three of the hardest working children are selected by Chief Eno to live in Venerable Lord Mriga’s temple. Do you know Lord Mriga?”

“I know him. What happens next?”

“The children train to become Devas. It is our reward for a good harvest. Three of our young to join your holy ranks.”

“Do the children come back?”

“They watch us from above,” Johannes said with wide eyes of awe.

“Have any children ever come back to the village though?”

“Not that I know of.”

He turned about to read the bear’s face, but she had vanished.

12.

It was on the seventh day of Sangha that the sky turned twilight purple and the air smelled strongly of lavender. Overhead scorched golden comets

trailing violet fire.

The masters and guests of Lord Mriga's temple assembled on the front lawn in prostration, Mriga, Ursula, and the other high masters at the head of the gathering.

Wild flames appeared before them, rising to the height of many palaces. From the flames stepped the seventeen representatives of the Devan sub-territories, their aides trailing behind.

Finally from the fire levitated Her Holiness Theodora, the newly elected high priestess of the Devan Union.

She presented as a snowy owl, with eyes of blue burning opals and a beak of jade. Her robe was partly a four-dimensional fabric; visible, invisible, visible again. Written intricately in moksha-dye across her brow were the eighteen precepts of compassion and nine founding truths of the world.

Mriga said, "My lady, congratulations on your appointment to the head of the Golden Council. May I take this opportunity to—"

Theodora extended a bejewelled wing of greeting.

Mriga extended a hoof to meet it, then paused.

The wing was intended for Ursula.

13.

The welcoming ceremony was concluded, and a banquet began in the temple for all seven hundred Devas. Mriga and Ursula were seated at the head table, Theodora between them.

Many delicacies were presented; truffles in lotus leaves, moksha-infused tea, xenon wine.

Ursula noticed that the purplish meat Mriga had seemed so enamoured of days earlier made no appearance.

When all were fed and full of drink, initiates filled the room with moksha incense, and several minutes of meditation elapsed.

Finally, all irises hexagonal, all highminds enriched, Mriga said to Theodora, "What of the inner territories, madam?"

“They are well,” Theodora said. “Several thousand worlds have been settled in the last year alone. New temples are being built as we speak. There is no civil war.”

“Exquisite.”

“And what of your world, Lord Mriga?”

“All is excellent. We are exporting more moksha to the inner territories than ever before, and as you will see from the scriptural libraries, my scholars are making first-rate theological progress.” Politer: “Madam, your visit is an honour, though I believe everyone is curious as to its motive.”

“Motive, my lord? You make it sound a scheme.”

“A misspeak, let me rephrase. This is the first time a head of the Golden Council has graced Sangha with their presence in over a millennium and a half.”

“A good leader breaks with the conventions of the past.” Theodora idly nibbled a feather. “In truth, I received a summary of Lady Ursula’s work on the bivnik effect and was rather inspired to learn of it in greater detail. It appears I have arrived too late to attend her lecture. And her lecture was cut short, I hear, by some pressing matter of your own, Lord Mriga.”

Needles danced in Ursula’s stomach. *Why is she driving a wedge?* Ursula said, “I will answer any questions you have, my lady.”

Mriga said, “With respect, this bivnik effect still has nothing to recommend it beyond the speculation of the, frankly, irreligious scholars of Gearheart University. Moreover, your previous occupation was as an artist, Lady Theodora. Do you think yourself qualified to judge such erudite imaginings?”

Theodora said in echoing vexspeech, “I am no scientist, sir, but Venerable Scholar Ursula *is*.”

Several tables nearby quietened to a murmur.

Ursula said gently, “Much thanks for the interest, my lady. Well, it is as reported to you. Many accuse Gearheart University of stoking the flames of fear, but the calculations do not lie. Without intervention, the Devan Union will collapse inside of a thousand years, we believe.”

“You claim certainty of this?”

“Lord Lepus and I believe we have shown mathematically that any system replicating without sufficient limit conditions will eventually devour

all resources in a finite space. Our interstellar society is no exception. The entire galaxy will dwindle if we continue on our current path."

Mriga purred, "Exactly, madam. We have an entire *galaxy*."

Ursula waited a respectful moment and countered, "I refer my lord to the study of exponential growth. There are many hundreds of thousands of unsettled worlds at present, yes, but as the rate of our expansion increases, it will compound upon itself. I would be only too happy to show you the mathematical formalisms."

Mriga said, "Though Scholar Ursula gives little credence to spirituality, it appears she is trying to found her own religion. . ."

Ursula counted to ten mentally and attempted to smile. She said, "The Devan Union thrives because its citizens can travel very quickly across space in Vex. Its citizens can travel in Vex because of moksha. The moksha base materials are produced from stars, and the extraction process depletes stars at over ten thousand times their normal rate of decline. Lord Mriga, please tell me if I have made a misstep so far."

Mriga said, "I take issue with your reductionist assumption that—"

Theodora put up a wing. "My lady, please continue."

Ursula said, "Madam, are you aware of the species of animal called *bivnik*?"

"I am not."

"Bivniks are horse-like creatures native to Gearheart, my world. They sport a single tusk from their snouts. The tusk grows in a circular fashion, looping from the nose back around to the forehead. Each bivnik has a patch of cartilage under its chin and they spend much time using it to file each other's tusks down. However, if a bivnik separates from the pack either by misadventure or curiosity, his tusk will soon grow unhindered. Within weeks it will loop around and pierce his own brain."

Theodora said, "I believe I see the metaphor."

"Our civilisation's tusk is not far from its forehead now. Furthermore, Lord Lepus and I suspect it is not just resource depletion we have to worry over. The Devan Union is developing spiritual technologies at a faster rate than ever before, thanks to your predecessor's educational policies. But each technology gives rise to a new need. And each new need requires a new technology to satisfy it."

“Such as, my lady?”

“Moksha, for example. Given to us by the Golden One himself, it allowed for our ability to step into four-dimensional space, to remould matter, and to expand our society. However, as I’m sure you’re aware, many scholars have embarked on the quest for *jhanamoksha*.” She cast a neutral glance at Mriga.

Theodora said, “I regret I have only just assumed my role as high priestess. I am still ignorant of many of the particulars of the Devan Union.”

Ursula said, “Jhanamoksha is a supposed enrichment of moksha that would allow entrance to a *fifth* dimension of spatial freedom, above the fourth we utilise in Vex.”

“Truly, it sounds a blessing.”

“Potentially. One could step from world to world in minutes, not weeks. One could remould matter by the *planet*, not the gram. But new needs might arise from this that we cannot imagine at present. For one thing, such instantaneous travel would mean we would inevitably colonise worlds faster, increasing the speed of the bivnik effect also.”

Theodora said, “Though you claim this *jhanamoksha* is but a theoretical substance?”

Mriga murmured, “For a technology so mystical, Venerable Scholar Ursula certainly talks as though she has perfected it already.”

Ursula watched her anxiety until it became an icicle that she snapped off from her mind. She said, “That is but a rumour, though it seems Lord Mriga has quite a fascination with the substance also.”

Mriga turned to Ursula and fixed her with a black stare. “My interest is compassionate in nature. Like you, I should like to save the Devan Union from itself. Only, I believe in progress, not crawling back into the ignorant dark of our ancestors. And as to the rumours that Gearheart University has perfected jhanamoksha already—”

“Simply rumours,” Ursula said.

“—If Lady Ursula were keeping technological secrets from the Golden Council, that would be a serious infraction. Technically it is called, I believe, high treason.”

Theodora said, “Lady Ursula is one of the founders of the Devan Union, Lord Mriga. As are you. I have no reason to think she would withhold

information in that fashion.”

Mriga said, “But of course,” and bowed deeply.

The celebrations continued. Masters and initiates danced about the hall, levitating, waltzing through Vex.

When Mriga left the table to perform a blessing, Theodora bent her head to Ursula and said quietly, “I would like all the data you have on this bivnik effect of yours.”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Have it transmitted directly to my temple on Phoebe. And if this *jhanamoksha* myth turns out to have more weight to it than you claim, I should like your findings on that also.”

“Madam, there is no truth to the rumours. . .”

Theodora bowed. “If you give me your word, I shall accept it.”

14.

A horn blare rang out at sunrise in the village of Hisarya.

As Chief Eno’s personal aide it fell to Johannes to meet the call. He jumped into his best clothes and ran to the village square.

Chief Eno was waiting for him in ceremonial robes. They set off for the village boundary, side by side.

The villagefolk remained in their yurts as was the custom, but surely all would be awake now, straining to overhear whatever came next.

When Chief Eno and Johannes reached the village boundary, Johannes whispered, “What is there for Lord Mriga to inspect? We won’t complete the new harvest cycle for another month.”

Chief Eno said, “His ways are mysterious.”

From the highgrass rose two antlers and two large brown ears, Lord Mriga emerging with a bear in tow.

Chief Eno bowed. Swallowing his astonishment, Johannes quickly remembered to bow also.

“Venerable Lord Mriga,” Chief Eno said. “We are honoured as always.”

Mriga said, “My blessings. This is Venerable Scholar Ursula. She is visiting my world on account of a holy festival. I thought I might take this opportunity to acquaint her with your culture.”

“An honour beyond words,” Chief Eno said and bowed to Ursula. “May I offer you both tea?”

The four of them traipsed towards the meeting lodge. Johannes attempted to meet Ursula’s eyes, but she kept them averted.

Inside the meeting lodge and the natives and Devas sat; the natives on low chairs, the Devas on cushions. Two busychildren poured milk tea into ceremonial cups and exited.

Lord Mriga slurped at his tea a while, then said finally, “The village appears in good order. The paths are clean and the houses well-maintained.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Chief Eno said.

Johannes tried to catch Ursula’s gaze again.

Mriga said, “It has been reported to me that the last moksha harvest was of adequate quantity and quality. We are very pleased.”

“That is a joy to hear.”

Mriga licked the tea about his mouth with a thin and slow tongue. He reached into his robe and mouthed a necklace bearing a morphing charm, and laid it on the table. Johannes’ heart began beating in thumping couplets. Mriga said formally, “It was communicated to me several days ago by parchment, courtesy of yourself Chief Eno, that this Devan artefact had been discovered in your village, a ceremonial piece. The original owner has not been found, nor the native thief who acquired it.” Clearly to Johannes: “Chief Eno thought it proper to inform me of the matter at once and I am indebted to his quick thinking.”

The charm morphed silently on the table. Johannes’ heart palpitated.

Mriga said, “Either the piece was stolen by a native, or gifted to them. Both possibilities present a problem. If it was stolen, then an intruder gained access to my temple somehow, and we need to know by what method. If it was gifted, then we are looking at a clear breach of the caste arrangement.” Mriga turned his black gaze on Chief Eno. “Do you have any suspicions regarding who acquired the piece?”

Chief Eno said, “Regrettably I do not, my lord.”

“And your assistant?”

Johannes shook his head. “I do not, my lord.”

Mriga said, “Your village is one of the most productive on my world and I am fond of its peoples. I would prefer not to grow unfond of it.” He left that in the air a while and mouthed the necklace back into his robe. “Sin is the cousin of ignorance, and it is doubtless only ignorance that committed this crime. Surely no native would intentionally endanger his or her own community. Moreover, my temple is celebrating the festival of Sangha and this is no time for retribution. In the interest of diplomacy, I am willing to overlook the matter.” He leaned across the table and gazed slowly from Chief Eno to Johannes. “However, if it should happen again, or anything else of the sort, I will demand lives in exchange for justice.”

“Certainly, my lord,” Chief Eno said.

“Certainly, my lord,” Johannes said.

The natives bowed. The Devas bowed.

All stood and smashed their cups on the floor in accordance with the meeting custom.

The natives accompanied the Devas back to the village boundary. Mriga said, “I thank you once again for your hard work this harvest.”

The Devas turned about. The antlers and brown ears disappeared slowly into the highgrass.

Johannes wanted to vomit and lie down. He said, “If there’s nothing else sir, I’d like to get to work on sharpening the tools for the next harvest cycle.”

Chief Eno said, “Of course, but will you accompany me to my house a moment? I’ve a few things to fetch for the day.”

They crossed the village, ignoring the many folk peering excitedly from their windows.

Once inside the yurt Chief Eno shut the door. He said, “That book on the high shelf, *The Edicts*, do you see it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fetch it for me, won’t you?”

Johannes fetched the book. Chief Eno searched about for a page. “Curse it! My eyes aren’t what they used to be. My glasses are in the lowest pouch of my robe. Get them for me, won’t you?”

Johannes bent for the chief's robe.

Chief Eno brought the book down on Johannes' head. Johannes collapsed. The chief smacked Johannes with his cane, smacked him again, kicked him in the ribs. Johannes scurried back into a corner.

The chief's eyes were wide and spit was webbed between his bared teeth. He said, "Much to my amazement you are even *more* stupid than you look." He threw the cane at Johannes. Johannes dodged.

Chief Eno brandished the book. "What are these?" he yelled.

"Please," Johannes whimpered.

"What are these?"

"*The Edicts*, sir."

"And what is the first? What is the very *first* edict?"

"Natives shall not interfere with matters Devan."

Chief Eno spat on Johannes. "And the second?"

In a whisper: "Natives shall not possess or covet Devan objects."

"Then *why*, Johannes, did I, from under your bed, procure a magic item such that belonged to the gods themselves?"

"Sir, I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Chief Eno launched the book. Johannes shielded his face. He was bleeding from the lip and forehead now, his left eye gummed up with blood, his right eye bloodshot.

"I might have told Mriga the whole story were we not short on farmers of late," Chief Eno said.

He bent to Johannes on shaking legs. He presented his pocked cheek, large parts of it black with death. Forcibly he took Johannes' hand and rubbed it over the craterous pocks. He said, "When I was young, an idiot in my village laid with a Deva. News of it got out somehow. We enjoyed ten years of the luda disease for that, the wrath of the gods. It killed my parents and brother. It killed hundreds." He choked out, "We have no weapons but our obedience. In return for that obedience, we will be rewarded with peacetimes and food and lineages." He spat on Johannes again. "I saw you going off in the evenings. I knew your game. I searched your house and was right to." He pressed Johannes' hand further into the pocks of his cheek, all deathly, dried, calcified skin. "Your mother's dying wish was that I take care of you. I intend to honour that request unless it threatens the village. Today you did threaten the village. You do it again and I will end you,

Johannes. I will see you burned before the whole village, bound to a pyre and incinerated like the phoenix of old, and you shan’t rise from the ashes. And the ashes will be buried in the lowest, driest, most dead and forsaken lands, and your name and ancestry will be buried with the ashes. Do you understand?”

Johannes nodded many times.

The chief spat on him once more and wiped his mouth. He collected his cane and left.

Johannes slumped to the floor. He listened to his own strained breathing a long time. He cried very quietly to himself and the tears mixed with his blood and were made pink.

Through a blood-gummed eye he observed the murals and mottos of the Devan Union etched on the ceiling of the yurt. A great deer stared down from the centre.

Its antlers were high.

Its robe was opulent.

Its gaze was hexagonal and absolute.

15.

Johannes spent two days in his yurt, coming out only at night to take a little food from the village store.

His nose was pointing too far left. Several large glasses of whisky, and he snapped his nose back into place, the bone grating and the pain so fierce it blinded him temporarily.

His ribs were bruised but not broken, he decided.

The shame would take the longest to heal.

On the third day he emerged from his yurt. Folk stared openly at his black and blue face.

He went to work in the moksha fields to the south. The new flowers were coming up already. Their scent crept under his breather mask. He tightened the mask and tried to take only light breaths.

In the evening he returned to his yurt and stared at the roof, unable to sleep.

He could not ignore a new and pressing sense that the world was much larger and stranger than he had supposed; that games and happenings were occurring nearby beyond anything he could fit inside his understanding.

16.

Johannes woke in the night.

His lantern was lit and in his reading chair sat Ursula. She said, “Nice nose. How did that happen?”

“We’re not supposed to talk.”

She leaned close and examined his face. “You’re pretty messed up, aren’t you? Was it the chief?”

Johannes nodded.

Gently she said, “I didn’t think the necklace would get you in trouble. Oh Johannes, I’m sorry.”

“We’re not supposed to talk,” he said again.

“Do you have anything to drink?”

“In the cupboard.”

She poured them both a whisky. She necked hers, refilled it. Johannes rolled over and closed his eyes.

Ursula said, “Why aren’t you curious about the world, Johannes?”

“We’re not supposed to talk.”

“I told you that your people existed long before Devas, and you didn’t look so surprised.”

“I was surprised.”

“But you didn’t want to know more?”

“No. Goodnight.”

Ursula kicked him not softly. She said, “I tell you what the stars are and you have no questions. I tell you that your ancestors’ machines are falling right out of the heavens and you only fall asleep. Aren’t you curious?

Aren’t you all burning with wanting to know something beyond your little hut and village? Anaximander’s arse! My folk are no different, gummed up ears, yelling *lala* over any fact too prickly to pick up. They’d sooner forget the word for fire than fetch a single damn bucket to put their burning houses out.”

Johannes murmured, “Natives shall not interfere with matters Devan.”

“An idiotic rule for idiots.”

“Then I’m an idiot.”

Slowly she said, “If so, there is something we can do about that. . . should you be willing. I’ll show you what I see, just for an evening. A little glimpse of Devan sight.”

He sat up. “Really?”

“Really.”

He gazed about the room.

His farming robes sat waiting on the floor.

His shoes sat waiting on the mat.

His tea kettle sat waiting on the desk.

He looked to the years behind and saw a featureless, beige corridor. He looked to the future and saw an identical corridor stretching ahead.

Endless hours in the moksha flowers, tilling and sowing, tilling and sowing. Endless hours in the oak tree, drinking and looking—looking and not seeing. Hearing and not listening; forever the perpetual, stinging, unnamed sense at the back of his mind that he lived inside a brain too small to understand or even witness the true beauty of the world, and so the only option left was to languish in the self-imposed illusion that objects and errands and little fears and little hopes were the full extent of being alive, else go mad.

And Mama, gone.

And the winters cold.

And every day just comfortable enough to bear the next, and barely.

Then death.

Ursula said, “Are you willing?”

Johannes said, “I’m willing.”

17.

Ursula collected Johannes' breather mask and peeked out the yurt door. The village quiet, she led them south.

The school, the stable, the well. They trod carefully and made little footfall until the village was only a smudge behind.

Soon they sighted the newly sowed fields of moksha, the flowers already an inch high, glowing a sleepy purple.

Ursula slipped the breather mask onto Johannes' face. She took his hand in her paw. She guided him into one of the larger fields, treading carefully around the flowers, right out into the middle of the moksha.

She bent to him and said, "Close your eyes, venerable one."

Johannes closed his eyes and Ursula put her paw across them. Johannes felt the paw ripple, the fur recede.

Ursula removed her paw.

Before Johannes stood a woman of perhaps thirty, a foot smaller than he, pale, with black hair in tangles about her shoulders. She was dressed in a Devan robe still, though it was far too big now. She untied the robe and it fell to the floor. She reached for his robe and untied that too.

They stood naked, save only for Johannes' breather mask. Ursula placed a hand on the mask and paused. Johannes nodded. She removed the mask.

Moksha fumes immediately filled his nose and mouth and eyes. His eyes stung and began to water. His nose and throat were full of fire and soon his lungs were full of fire also.

"I'm dying," he rasped. "I'll die."

Ursula held him up, stroked his face. "Breathe," she said. He held his breath. "Breathe, it's okay."

He clamped his eyes closed, covered his nose. His lungs were empty of air and burning, his chest full of acid, limbs gone to milk.

"Venerable one," came Ursula's distant voice. "*Breathe*."

Finally he took a desperate gasp of air and cried out and fell to the floor.

Consciousness dallied, dimmed, and died. The world and its forms shrank to a point of infinite smallness, and Johannes to infinite smallness also.

He was a nothing, all empty.

He opened his eyes again. He wiped the tears from them and looked to the world.

It was not the world of a moment ago. It morphed from second to second, *seed to tree to kindling, baby to man to bones,* a stream one could never step in twice—or step in *once* even; form replacing form, forever and never.

He looked to the moksha. The flowers were not just flowers, but alive as *he* was alive.

He looked to his arms and legs. They were not just limbs, but bounded manifolds of infinite cooperation; malleable, regenerating, unthanked and automatic.

He looked to Ursula. She was not just a god, not just a woman, but a soul–a mind as he was a mind–so beautiful and good it made him ashamed he would never be as beautiful or as good.

Ursula laid down beside Johannes and he stared into her blue, geometric eyes.

She put her mouth on his. They wrapped about each other as though terribly hungry or thirsty or dying. The scent of skin, of mouth, of hair.

Everything was new; everything was dancing. In Johannes' lowmind he felt light-headed. In his highmind he felt endless.

He watched Ursula's skin. He thought, *What is skin? It must be made of something, building blocks. And what are those little building blocks made of? How deep does the world go and—*

He tasted Ursula's mouth. He thought, *What is taste, or smell, or sensation for that matter? What is inside me making it real? Is the sensation of me having sensations real or—*

Ursula pushed him onto his back and behind her he saw the night sky, the stars. He thought, *What are the heavens? How far do they extend? If I travelled to the edge of the heavens and reached my hand beyond the boundary of space, what would I be reaching into? Would it—*

Ursula kissed him all over his face. She bit his ear. She bit his shoulder. "Keep your head," she said. And he tried to, all stupefied with the new things in him and the new things outside of him.

My god, he thought. *I'm alive.*

18.

They lay naked in the moksha holding each other.

For a long time Johannes was unable to speak. Even the simplest line of inquiry span off into awe and confusion.

He looked for something familiar to hold onto, a saying, a memory, an axiom.

Nothing.

Horror. From every side suddenly, quiet, all-pervasive horror.

There wouldn't be certainty in the world ever again.

He whispered, "Is this how it is for you, never knowing anything for sure?"

Ursula nodded.

"I can't ever go back, can I?"

Ursula shook her head.

19.

Ursula and Johannes established a routine of meeting late after sundown when all the village lights were out, Ursula coming to him as a native woman now.

Usually they made love, sometimes wildly, sometimes nicely.

Afterwards, lying in the moksha together, Ursula would produce books and papers for Johannes to take home in secret to his yurt—ancient forgotten names: Galen, Lucretius, Bentham, Pankhurst.

Other times she would ask pointed questions about native life.

Do you know how old your village is?

How do you think Devas made the world?

Do you know what science is?

Johannes would answer to the best of his ability. Sometimes he would ask questions too.

How old is *my village?*

How did *Devas make the world?*

What is *science?*

But Ursula would only kiss him on the cheek or say, “Well, aren’t you a curious one,” and watch him concernedly when she thought he wasn’t looking.

With all her coyness and knowledge-gaps about native culture, she didn’t seem quite so divine to him now.

More a woman playing at what a child might think a god.

20.

Johannes was working in the moksha fields when a muddle of farmers passed by carrying many bags of fertiliser.

It occurred to Johannes one might build a wheeled cart and move the fertiliser that way instead. It would take two farmers only minutes to do the work of twenty.

He suggested this to the passing farmers. They exchanged a glance and continued on.

The next morning a messenger came to the village and reported that a case of ‘luda’—or *brain disease*—had struck a village only four miles away.

Johannes listened to the messenger tell of the horrors of luda, of the villagefolk there forever trying to draw water from waterless wells, or lying on the ground and waiting for death.

Johannes called out, “Do they trade with other villages, these folk with luda?”

“Why?” the messenger said.

“Because maybe they caught the disease from somewhere else. Maybe it spreads from person to person.”

“Why should a disease do that?” the messenger asked.

“How *else* would it spread?” Johannes replied.

The villagefolk turned about to stare at Johannes.

Staring particularly intently was Chief Eno.

21.

Lying naked on their cliff one night, the ancient and dead city glittering in the distance, Johannes said, “Do you know everything?”

“No,” Ursula said.

“Are you all-powerful like *The Edicts* say?”

“No.”

“Well, do you live forever then?”

“We don’t have to die for a long time if that’s what you mean.”

He stared at the city and imagined it full of natives; men and women planting crops and kneading bread and not living in fear of rageful deer. He said, “Some of the villages nearby are very sick.” Ursula nodded. “Why don’t the Devas do something about it?”

She looked Johannes over as though debating whether to inform a child how children are made. She said, “Do you have ants in your village?”

“Of course.”

“How many ants do you think we killed on our way out here tonight?”

“Ten, a hundred, I don’t know.”

Ursula said, “You know, you could never kill an ant again if you stopped leaving your yurt.”

Johannes shrugged. “Ants aren’t clever and it doesn’t bother me so much.”

“Then you’re not such a kind god yourself, huh.”

Johannes dressed and began walking back to his village.

“Oh come on,” Ursula called after.

22.

Five days and no sign of Ursula.

Johannes missed her and told himself he didn’t. The mornings betrayed him though; waking up alone and finding Ursula’s cinnamon scent still on his sheets.

Six days and nothing. He saw Ursula's face in the villagewomen's faces.

Seven days and he didn't want to eat.

He waited until sundown and returned to their meeting cliff. Sat on the cliff already was a bear in a blue robe looking out over the water, Madeleine on her lap.

"Where *were* you?" Johannes said, trying not to shout.

Ursula patted the blanket. "Sit down, venerable one." Johannes remained standing. She said, "I was rude, and you're right to be angry. I did all this, the moksha, the questions. I see the difference in you already."

"You never tell me a damn thing."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. What would you like to know?"

"Who are you? Who are the Devas?"

From her robe, Ursula brought a small metal device of cogs and legs, a mechanical spider. It clambered around under its own power, then disappeared into the air. It reappeared a few feet away, scuttled about, and disappeared again. Ursula said, "We give these to our children, to teach them."

"To teach them what?"

"See if you can catch it."

Johannes reached for the metal spider. Each time he almost had it in his grasp it walked into the air and appeared again some distance away. Finally, it came to rest on the edge of the cliff, taunting them with a little dance.

Ursula put her hand through the air and her hand disappeared as the spider had, then reappeared about the spider and retrieved it.

She said, "There are more dimensions to move about in than the three you're familiar with."

"Heaven?" Johannes said.

She shook her head. "It's not good, not evil, just another point of reference. And as you've recently discovered, new points of reference bring new problems to refer to. It is a world at a right angle to this one called *Vex*."

She put her paw across his eyes. When she removed the paw she was native Ursula again, tangle-haired and human. She said, "I want you to imagine an insect."

“An ant,” Johannes said.

“No, let’s not go there again. An insect, a beetle maybe—on a branch. And imagine if it set off walking around the outside of the branch in a circle and ended up right back where it had started. Think how confused it would be to find itself returning there.”

After some consideration Johannes said, “Because it thinks it’s walking in a straight line?”

Ursula nodded. “Well, it *is* walking in a straight line, only it doesn’t understand three-dimensional space. Now, you’re much better looking than an insect, but the understanding gap between yourself and someone living in Vex isn’t so different. I’m sorry that sounds mean, but it’s the truth. You live in Samsara, the old world, three dimensions of space, one of duration.”

“But the heavenly plane—”

“*Vex*,” she said. “There’s no heaven about it.”

“Vex then. Do you live in it all the time?”

“Yes. And so do you.”

Johannes scoffed. “I think I’d know if that was true.”

“Well, many beetles can’t fly, but it doesn’t stop up and down existing, does it? Your body lives in Vex, even if you don’t know it. That’s what moksha’s for; lets you think a little beyond up and down.”

“Then show me *Vex*,” Johannes said. She shook her head. “Please.”

She kissed him on the mouth and said, “Not today.”

Johannes played glumly with some grass blades.

“Please don’t do the sad face,” she said.

“I’m an ant. Ants don’t get sad.”

Several minutes of his sulking silence and Ursula said, “Oh hell.” She directed a few hand gestures at Madeleine, and the spyle shot out above them and exploded into a tangle of dashes and symbols; blazing glyphs hanging in the air accompanied by little, intricate illustrations.

Ursula said, “I can’t show you where Devas live, but I’ll tell you where we come from. You must keep all of this a secret though, you understand? Even from your other bear lovers.”

Johannes nodded eagerly.

They rolled into each other.

Ursula said, “Are you lying comfortably, venerable one?” Johannes nodded. “Then we’ll begin.” She cleared her throat, squinted at the glyphs, and began to read. “So it was, long ago, that the Myriad of Man had spread to many thousands of worlds within Samsara. . .”

23.

So it was, long ago, that the Myriad of Man had spread to many thousands of worlds within Samsara.

Lord Perun was the king of the Myriad of Man. He lived on a beautiful forest world, within an opulent palace of glass towers, in the city of Serdika.

Lord Perun and his wife wanted for nothing but a child, and soon enough they had one. They called the child Anaximander after an ancient wiseman.

Anaximander was doted on by servants and tutored by the wisest scholars in the Myriad of Man.

It is said when Anaximander first learned to speak that he and his father played a game in the forests of Serdika.

What is this for? Anaximander asked, pointing to a tree.

It grows tall and bears fruit, Lord Perun said.

What is this for? Anaximander asked, pointing to the sky.

It brings the day and keeps the air in, Lord Perun said.

What is this for? Anaximander asked, pointing to himself.

To that there is no answer. . . Lord Perun said.

Much to his father’s quiet horror, Anaximander continued down strange lines of questioning. Soon Anaximander’s tutors were approaching Lord Perun telling of how the boy had found contradictions in the General Theoretics of the World and asking what was to be done about it.

Lord Perun instructed that the tutors continue to teach the boy the standard texts and not indulge his fancies.

Another few weeks and the tutors came to Lord Perun again telling of how the boy had mastered the General Theoretics of the World, and was

now demanding to know why the theoretics worked.

Lord Perun attended his son's chambers. They made talk of small things at first, then Lord Perun questioned the boy as to why he was giving his tutors such a difficult time.

Anaximander explained that he was grateful for the tutelage, and believed he understood the finer points of the General Theoretics: everything was fields and interactions, all was rational.

But what, Anaximander asked, constructed the world in its current configuration and not some other? Why *this* much matter in the universe, and why matter that works in *this* way? The glove is beautiful, but from whence came the hand?

Lord Perun flew into a rage at his son.

You have been loved! he shouted. You have enjoyed every extravagance and foodstuff in line with your heart's whims. You have received the finest education ever provided in the Myriad of Man. And yet, even with the world explained, even with the great Is revealed, you seek more, something beyond the perfect affirmative. It is an empty dream. You are searching for an explanation beyond explanation, an impossible *meta-yes.*

Anaximander said, That is a fine way to put it.

Lord Perun dismantled many objects in Anaximander's room and his yelling carried to each of the eleven forests and five library domes of the palace.

Anaximander asked his father if there was a tutor in the palace who might instruct him not in the description of things, but the *meaning* of them.

Lord Perun replied that there wasn't a tutor in the galaxy who could do that.

And so it was, when his father was gone, that Anaximander removed his rings and braids and robes. He washed the perfume from his skin and the spices from his hair.

He snuck into the palace kitchens and emptied a blue sack of potatoes, draping the sack about himself for warmth.

Then silently he left the palace and went off into the villages of Serdika, into ignorance, in search of the meta-yes.

24.

A week later and several of the old folk in Johannes' village fell sick. The sickness began with confusion, then repetitious behaviour—unlocking a door, locking it again, over and over. Luda disease had arrived.

Farming was put on hold and Chief Eno ordered most folk to stay in their yurts and tend to their children or work on their stitching.

Returning from the village store one evening, Johannes noticed Giorgi the village scribe on his knees. He was attempting to tie a shoelace, but could not complete the loop.

Johannes greeted Giorgi. Giorgi only looked up with vacant eyes and went back to the fruitless shoelace exercise. The next stage of the disease would be death.

Johannes said, "Giorgi, I don't think you are very well, and I would like to show you something while I still can."

Giorgi nodded with blank eyes.

Johannes fetched two breather masks from the equipment hut. He took Giorgi's arm and walked him through the abandoned valley to the moksha fields, south. He applied the breather mask to his own face, then the other to Giorgi's, and led him out into the moksha.

Giorgi's eyes flitted from Johannes to the ground, then to a broken place in his own mind.

Johannes said, "The moksha won't kill you, Giorgi. That's all a myth, I promise."

He removed the mask from Giorgi's face.

At once Giorgi's eyes bulged and he coughed mightily and pulled at his nose. His face was streaming with tears and his cheeks were flushing a mighty red.

He cried out and when it became unbearable to watch, Johannes went to put the mask back on Giorgi's face. Giorgi pushed the mask away and ceased coughing suddenly.

His eyes were steady. He fell to his knees and examined the dirt with wide, shining eyes. He plunged his fingers into the dirt and burst out laughing.

He looked up to the stars. "Oh. . ." he said.

“Giorgi. . .” Johannes whispered.

Giorgi examined his withered old hands. He began to cry. “I have,” he whispered.

“What do you have?” Johannes whispered back.

“I have *been*. . .”

25.

Over the next fortnight, Johannes took three more villagefolk into the moksha fields: a shoemaker, a beermaker, and a grieving widow.

They did not all cry like Giorgi had, but as Johannes led them back out of the field he could see that their eyes were slow and wide. He made them swear not to mention the ritual to anyone and they swore. Then he took more folk out into the moksha.

Subtle changes began to creep into the village. The washing lines acquired pulleys so that they might be reeled in. A map was drawn up segregating the farmland so farmers could work more efficiently. The beer tasted nicer in general.

Johannes kept no special contact with those he had initiated, but they passed one another occasionally in the street and exchanged a knowing glance.

Meanwhile everything was wonderful to Johannes, or worthy of wonder now; the world, himself, and the golden bridge between.

He walked about in a permanent feigned stupor, awake and pretending he wasn’t.

Urinating one morning he became transfixed with an intricate pattern on the plaster of the toilet and mangled the tip of his penis in his trouser zip.

Such is the path to enlightenment.

26.

Falling asleep beside Ursula, Johannes mentioned in passing that he had been taking villagefolk into the moksha. Ursula bolted awake immediately. She asked him many questions, most of them pertaining to: Are the folk behaving differently?

Johannes could not deny they were.

He reported that the shoemaker had begun making laces from twine rather than catgut, that the beermaker had assembled a team of busychildren to test how best to store the hops, and that the grieving widow smiled occasionally at the lunch gatherings now.

Ursula put her hands over her eyes. She said, “You don’t know what you’ve done. . .”

“They’re better for breathing the moksha. I am too.”

“Johannes. . .”

“Don’t you want them feeling how I feel now? There are new things in my head. I didn’t even know I *had* a head.”

Ursula said nothing.

Johannes knew responsibility then.

Another new discovery.

27.

Outside the palace no one recognised Anaximander as the son of Lord Perun, with his blue sack and bare feet.

He loafed about the streets and the markets and spoke with all those he came across.

Aren’t the General Theoretics sublime? he would say. The world is built of fields and interactions. Time can bend. Space can warp. What do you think made the world so?

The streetfolk gave a few grumbles of approval and continued in their work.

Clearly this approach was fruitless.

In search of inquiring minds like his, Anaximander left the boundaries of Serdika and entered the Great Forest.

He wandered alone, surviving on fruit and berries and streams.

After several days he encountered a madman who spoke of a group of theoreticians in the strawberry lands to the east who sought what Anaximander desired: the cause of causes.

Anaximander walked for many hours as instructed, full of excitement, cutting his way through jubfigs and palms.

At last he located the group the madman had spoken of. They were old men and women with long hair and slow gazes.

Anaximander said, Great gurus of logic, I seek the cause of causes. I seek the meta-yes.

You have come to the right place, an old man said. Sit down and learn these number tables.

Anaximander stayed with the group many months, memorising their formulas and equations.

He learned to calculate curves in impossible dimensions. He learned to break infinities down until they resembled comprehensible numbers. He learned to compute the world.

One day an old wisewoman declared Anaximander's tuition was complete. She explained that with these new theoretical games, there was nothing in the universe that could not be accounted for by number and measure.

I thank you for your tutelage, Anaximander said. But I am still no closer to explaining *why* the theoretics work the way they do.

We never promised you knowledge of that kind, the old woman replied.

You said you would teach me the cause of causes, Anaximander said.

The old woman pointed to the number tables and equations. She said, There is no knowledge beyond description.

Anaximander said, If I told you of a man who hunts through the refuse and rubbish every day selecting only matter he can eat, or breaks into homes raiding pantries, you would be no closer to understanding his motives until I mentioned the meaning of his quest. He is *hungry*. All the descriptions of his eye colour and his height do nothing to explain that.

The wisewoman said, The universe is not a man.

No, Anaximander said. I believe its wants are stranger yet.

He thanked the old woman and the group for their instruction.

He set off again into the forest.

28.

Anaximander spent many weeks alone again in the forest trying to make sense of what he and the world were made of.

He was withered from eating little and walking much, and he raised his withered hands to his eyes. Under the appearance of his hands, under their colour and shape, a mystery lived inside; one that operated without need of supervision, automated and self-perpetuating.

Where had this order originated?

What was it to *be* anything?

Finally he reached a colossal mountain and began to climb.

He came upon many vineyards during his climb, large facilities producing wine. Several winemen recognised him as the son of Lord Perun and offered him endless drink. He could find no reason to refuse.

He spent several months drunk, growing yet thinner, hungover each morning, intoxicated each evening—no closer to solving the mystery of Is.

What was there beyond theoretics? If number and measure couldn't tease out the meaning of the world, there was no hope in other approaches, surely.

Stumbling across the mountains one afternoon he spied a party moving through the pass below. He descended to greet them. They sported musical instruments and began a merry song for Anaximander, improvising as they went.

They sang of Anaximander's thin arms and thin legs. They sang of Anaximander's long hair and inquisitive eyes.

When they were finished Anaximander bowed to them and thanked them for their song, though he admitted he did not deserve the thing.

The leader of the troop told Anaximander that all things in the universe deserved celebration, and Anaximander was no exception.

Why should all things deserve celebration? Anaximander asked.

The leader of the troop replied that the universe was a mystery in plain sight, and it was right to sing its praises at all hours of the day. Also, since Anaximander and the musicians were made of universe, really the universe was praising itself, and wasn't that marvellous?

Anaximander knew he had found kindred spirits. They were the very opposite of the dull theoreticians; number tables be damned.

The musicians invited him to join their joyful ranks. He accepted without hesitation.

Anaximander and the troop travelled from village to village singing for the folk they found there, rich and poor (though who was poor in the Myriad of Man, really?)

They extolled the virtues of trees. They extolled the virtues of mud. They praised everything from fire to thunder to photons and no one sang louder than Anaximander himself, glad was he that he had chanced upon a group of men and women with outlooks so close to his regarding fundamental matters.

After many months the travellers reached the ancient city of Plovdiv. They toured about the markets and squares singing their ballads of world and nature, and many came to listen with wide eyes and open ears.

Drunk on the music and drunk on ale also, Anaximander sang particularly loudly. To the old tune he took up his own new lyrics now.

And praise to the world, and praise to the trees!

And praise to the doctor, and praise to disease!

But what underneath them? What of that *land?*

Though the glove is divine, from whence came the hand?

The troop stopped playing. The audience stared.

What about the hand? someone asked.

Anaximander said, The world is beautiful, certainly. I have extolled its virtues for many months beside this band of merry folk. But what gave the world its beauty? What deemed that it be *this* beauty and not some other? What deemed that it be *this* structure and not some other, or even that it exist *at all*?

The troop and the audience stared with blank faces. Someone said, What does it matter how the bread was made if it's delicious?

Anaximander said, Wouldn’t you like to know where the flour came from though?

No, came the reply.

Anaximander took off the majestic robes the troop had provided him and thanked the troop for their hospitality.

He was once again a beggar, bare—his destiny barer yet.

He continued on.

29.

Free to walk the grounds of Lord Mriga’s palace, Ursula did so.

She visited the scriptural libraries and relic cabinets, the perfume groves and liberation caves.

She visited the fractal halls where oshos practised insight meditation—robed and bejewelled elephants levitating around a black fire.

Finally she came upon the consumables quarter, a partitioned quadrant of the palace secreted behind drapes and plain wooden doors. Within were bubbling moksha pots where native-picked moksha was boiled and concentrated into the dried sticks used as incense. Behind the pots was a door guarded by initiates. Silently Ursula walked into Vex, cutting straight past the initiates in four-dimensional space, and reemerged into Samsara.

She found herself in a kitchen. Many chefs were preparing meat on chopping boards, then throwing the meat into bins, from which initiates delivered the meat into some kind of huge, whirring machine that billowed moksha clouds.

Ursula passed through Vex again, further into the operation, stepping out to what appeared a refuse chamber of many storage shelves and an incinerator machine.

Countless mundane objects were assorted on shelves: clothes and bracelets and garlands. She examined a pair of trousers to find they were two-legged, meant for a native. Small too—intended for a native child, she realised.

All of the clothes were child-sized in fact. Several of them sported the zigzag tartan of Hisarya, Johannes’ village.

In a corner were several metal vats, locked. She chose a vat at random and pushed her nose through Vex to smell what was inside. She recognised the scent immediately.

“Madam,” came a voice from behind.

Ursula summoned every drop of will in her highmind not to yelp. “Lord Mriga.”

“Were you curious about the more everyday proceedings of the palace, you need only to have asked for a tour.”

“I must be lost, my apologies. I wonder, my lord, these—”

“Are native children’s clothes, yes.”

“Would it be an imposition to ask why?”

Mriga mouthed the incinerator on and it spat twisting blue flames. He fetched a pair of dungarees and threw them into the incinerator. He said contemplatively, “It is a curious thing that for all our capacity to manipulate nature, there are still certain commodities we must procure in the old, laborious fashion. Gold from the ground, books from the trees and so on. Some things remain forever primitive.”

Ursula peered into Vex just a moment and saw that the walls beside and behind her were made of newmetal, impermeable to travel in four dimensions.

Mriga continued, “I often think it a shame that we have dispensed with many old protocols and traditions in the vain name of progress. Though, some endure not because we have failed to transcend them, but because they are perfect as they are.” He threw heaps of clothes into the incinerator now, coats and hats and little garlands. He said, “Do you know, on this very same world millennia ago when natives held dominion, there was a delicacy.” He turned on her. “Bear. So cultured were the natives that they’d let a bear have its fill of berries in the mountains, and when it was full and fat they would kill the bear with a projectile weapon.” Mriga began to salivate and licked the falling saliva from his mouth with a black tongue. “And the flesh within was blue, infused, *bursting* with berry juice, and when the flesh was pulled from the bone it dripped sugar. I dare imagine it tasted delicious, no?”

Ursula nodded, keeping her highmind on the sound of her breath.

“We are not so primitive as to eat bears these days, but we have cattle, and for many years the cattle and their calves pitter-patter about in the moksha as they work, getting their little feet and hands all spiced with moksha, infused, *bursting* with it. And madam, when the cattle are slaughtered and the flesh is pulled from the bone, it drips concentrated *wisdom*.”

“Cattle, my lord?”

“Cattle.”

Just above a whisper, Ursula said, “I’m sure you’re aware that the execution of natives is prohibited under the Native Welfare Act. . .”

Black eyes empty and unblinking, Mriga said, “Not only do you come to this world as a fearmonger, but a do-gooder too. Venerable scholar, never forget that the fight against tyranny soon becomes a kind of tyranny of its own.”

Doing her best to keep her voice steady she said, “I should like to know why you are executing natives.”

Mriga hummed to himself, “Ultimate transcendence is the ultimate good. Ergo, all things are permitted in the attempt to attain it. But then, you already know the answer to your question, madam.”

Ursula nodded to the vats. “You’re trying to make jhanamoksha.”

Mriga raised an ironic eyebrow. “But such a thing has never existed, you claim! Such a thing *can* never exist, no?”

She eyed the pipes and vents, the elaborate mechanisms of filtration. Her stomach attempted to empty its contents.

Watching her revulsion, Mriga said, “I do not pass judgement on Gearheart’s culture, primitive as it is. Do not pass judgement on mine.”

Native flesh transmuted into jhanamoksha, oh gods, it’s. . . Her highmind took control again. “I am tired. I am ever so tired. I might retire, my lord.”

“As you like.”

She passed him with held breath, searching her memory for a teaching or mantra that applied to this thing—finding none.

Mriga purred, “Oh, I should add, the native population was bulging a little. A short-lived brain pestilence has been introduced to keep their numbers down this season. I’d recommend avoiding the native lands for the

foreseeable future.” He turned about to catch her with a black ruby eye. “Though, having no interest in natives I can’t imagine why that would concern you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, my lord.”

The little trousers and coats all burned, Mriga began work on the little shoes.

30.

Her Holiness Theodora was asleep in her chamber. She rested in native-form as most Devas preferred to when alone—her hair plaited, her skin tattooed with fractal mandalas.

She woke to a distant whisper calling her name. It appeared to be coming from the water carafe at her bedside. She peered into the carafe, and there on the water’s surface was a shimmering facsimile of Ursula.

“Madam,” the image of Ursula said. “I must ask you not to speak too loudly. We are both probably under surveillance.”

“What in Anaximander’s name is going on?”

“I’m talking to you via a projection machine, though I don’t think the signal will remain stable too much longer.”

“Gearheart’s scientific miracles abound.” Theodora’s skin began to ripple as she took up her ceremonial owl-form, but Ursula said, “Please madam, there’s little time. Let’s not stand on ceremony.”

In solidarity, Ursula took up her own native-form, of black tangled hair and freckles. They were but two humans then.

Theodora said, “As you wish. Now, what is this about, venerable scholar?”

“I’ve made several distasteful discoveries in the temple, madam. For one thing I can confirm Mriga and his congregation are executing natives, and children at that.”

“You’ve seen evidence?”

“I have.”

Theodora checked the chamber door was locked and returned to the carafe. “Is there more to it?”

“Among the equipment preparing the native flesh I also found a number of purification devices and vessels of jhanamoksha.”

“You insisted that substance was a myth, no?”

Ursula remained coyly silent a moment, rubbed an ear. “I can confirm it is not a myth. Judging by the scent, Mriga has still not perfected the recipe, but it is most definitely close.”

“That is to say you have created it successfully already then, at Gearheart University?”

“We have, though only out of curiosity. None know the working recipe save for myself and Lord Lepus.”

“Lord Mriga was correct that this constitutes treason.”

Ursula said, “That I cannot deny.”

“We will get to it later. For now, what do you suppose Lord Mriga wishes to do with this *substance,* if perfected?”

“I believe he has designs on subverting the Golden Council.”

“That is quite a claim.”

“If I am wrong, I will gladly take responsibility. If I am right though, we are both in considerable danger. Is your door guarded?”

“It is.”

“With your own entourage?”

“Yes. Will you kindly tell me what is going on?”

Ursula collected herself. “Madam, you asked for a summary of my work on the bivnik effect. The mathematician Lord Lepus and I have been arguing for the moderation of travel in Vex for centuries now. Stoyanium-32, the base material of moksha, must be mined from stars.”

“Of that I’m aware.”

“We are seeing unprecedented numbers of stoyanium-32 mining stations being constructed throughout the galaxy. We are also seeing an unprecedented number of stars rapidly decaying as a result. The miners only move on to the next viable star and the process continues.”

“It is a ghastly thing, but such are the times.”

“Your predecessor, Lord Simeon, a close associate of Lord Mriga’s, barred us from attending Golden Council meetings to report our warnings, accusing us of doomsaying. With his death and your appointment to the head of the Golden Council, I saw an opportunity to raise the alarm once again. I’ve been a reader of your poetry for centuries. Much of it seemed to hint at a reverence of nature. I rather hoped that might mean you’d act in a more. . . conscientious capacity than Lord Simeon when you became high priestess.”

Theodora said into the carafe, “I might be the poet, but it seems you’re the charmer. Yes, venerable scholar, when your research was covertly spoken of by senators and the like it somewhat piqued my interest, hence my visit.”

“I thank you for that.”

“What does any of this have to do with *jhanamoksha* though?”

Ursula said, “Stoyanium-32 is only the first stage in the moksha production process. Next it must be cultivated agriculturally, on farming worlds. Few Devas are willing to do the work, and so most plantations use natives. However, given the passing of the Native Welfare Act some time ago, it has become rather unfashionable to openly keep natives in such bondage, and so there are only a handful of moksha plantations left in the Devan Union. They are on outpost worlds, you see, so as not to illicit guilt. Mriga’s power stems from exactly this, the scarcity of plantations. The Golden Council wouldn’t dare contradict him, else he may well withhold his moksha supply from the galaxy.”

“This is an alarming prospect to say the least. . .” Theodora murmured.

“I agree, my lady. Nonetheless, we have been trying to quietly counter this power imbalance at Gearheart University. Some time ago Lord Lepus and I began development of a technological alternative to Vex that doesn’t use stoyanium-32. We hoped it would remove the need for star mining and native moksha farming.”

“I am to assume you were successful?”

“Partly. We’ve made progress with opening Vex windows for communication, such a device am I using to talk with you now.”

“May I ask why you have kept also *this* a secret from the council?”

Ursula shook her head. “Please, madam. We can discuss the particulars later and I will apologise in full. I’m not sure how much longer I can keep the window open.”

“Very well. Please go on then.”

“For as long as I’ve known Lord Mriga he has favoured the more transcendent myths surrounding Anaximander’s life, and his ascension to Nibbana. Many such as myself believe the Golden One to have been a wiseman, that he simply let go of craving. It is Lord Mriga’s assertion, however, that Anaximander found a holy plane beyond our own, a realm above Vex. I have watched the debate play out for two millennia now. Is Nibbana a state of mind or a genuine, attainable place of power? Clearly Lord Mriga is of the second camp. I suspect he is developing jhanamoksha in an attempt to utilise that over-realm. If he is successful, the Golden Council will be powerless against him.”

Theodora made a tutting sound with her beak. “But venerable scholar, you claim you have developed this jhanamoksha substance already. Did you not at least experiment with it?”

“Only once. It was a traumatic experience, more disorienting even than the first time one steps into Vex. I can confirm there is a spatial realm above the sacred fourth, but it is not one Lord Lepus and I believe can be mentally tolerated. Nonetheless, it is clear Lord Mriga is at least attempting to gain entry to that realm himself.”

“Do you believe he will be successful?”

“Honestly, I do not know, but I can guarantee this: with your succession to the head of the council, things have been accelerated. Not only are you more open-minded than your predecessor, but Mriga no doubt suspects you are at least willing to consider the bivnik hypothesis. This is a direct threat to his power, and I suspect he will shortly begin withholding moksha from nearby worlds, possibly even readying for a breakaway from the Devan Union. He believes our race is entitled to every world in the galaxy, and that the secret of our endurance is in absolute expansion. Such a philosophy might be admirable were we not living in a galaxy of limited resources.”

Theodora muttered, “And if all you have said is true, what do you suppose will be his next move?”

“This is as much as I know. He is executing natives, using their corpses to develop dangerous technologies, and potentially readying to subvert the

Golden Council.”

Theodora nibbled a fingernail, an act of nervousness Ursula felt she was privileged somehow to witness. Theodora said, “Madam, how useful it would be now if, in all your years of secret invention, you and Lord Lepus happened to concoct a machine that might foretell the future. . .”

“We cannot claim that miracle, my lady.”

“Quickly then, if what you say is true, how do we proceed?”

“I beg that you leave for your temple on Phoebe as soon as you can and relay what I’ve told you to the Golden Council. Please draw their attention to the murder of natives. And, I beg, as a secondary matter, kindly raise the issue of the bivnik effect. Soon enough the Devan Union’s growth will increase to the point that, even with council intervention, the expansion cannot be contained. Our fate will be sealed then. Mriga is a temporary distraction. I promise you that bivnik will be the real catastrophe.”

Theodora nodded. “I swear I shall try to honour all these requests. And what will you do?”

“I’ll make my return to Gearheart as soon as possible.”

“Do you suspect Mriga intends to take you captive here?”

“Without a doubt. I’m currently the greatest threat to his power. It’s entirely possible I was lured here to be neutralised. In any case, it’s imperative that bivnik is taken seriously by the council elders. From the bottom of my heart, I ask that you make this happen on my behalf.”

Theodora nibbled a nail again in thought. “That will not do. You must put your case to the council directly, first with testimony of what you’ve seen here, then with as much proof of your *bivnik effect* as you have. I am not a scientist. Your testimony is essential.”

“My lady, Lord Lepus and I have travelled to the council chambers on Phoebe many times, never to gain entrance. We were branded pariahs centuries ago, as I have said.”

“On this occasion you have my backing though. Tomorrow I’ll announce my entourage is to depart on account of an unforeseen diplomatic emergency. You will join us and accompany me back to Phoebe. I will admit you into the council chambers myself. No one would dare bar a visitor with the high priestess’ blessing, however pernicious Mriga’s influence. You will have the speaking floor for as long as you require it,

days if necessary. The slaughter of natives was outlawed over a millennium ago. It shan't be tolerated on my watch. The threat of societal collapse is quite another thing, and you'll make your case for that too."

Ursula bowed. "That is most kind, my lady. Though, with deep respect, there are still things holding me here temporarily."

Theodora raised an eyebrow. "Rumours abound that you have a native lover. That's your business, but this current thing takes priority. Come back for this *acquaintance* of yours in time. I cannot make a compelling case before the council without your presence. For now we must tend to our house."

"My lady."

31.

In Hisarya the villagefolk began stringing bunting between the central yurts for the coming Children's Day celebrations. Three more children were to receive the honour of ascendance to devahood: Slavyanka, Mitko, and Sophia.

Johannes watched the preparations picking up, all chatter and glee. Especially gleeful were the three chosen children, paraded as they were about the village from home to home to say goodbye and wish everyone well.

Ursula had not come for several days and so Johannes went wandering, to the oak tree, to the cliff, into the moksha fields even; still no bear.

Finally in desperation he ran to the lake where they had first met not a month ago. Out of the water peered a shimmering and pale face from behind tangles of black hair.

"Venerable one, you look so sad," the image of Ursula said rather sadly herself.

"Won't you come here?" Johannes said.

Ursula shook her head.

"Just a kiss then."

"I can't."

Johannes knelt. Ursula's reflection put a hand to the surface of the lake and Johannes did the same. He found no reciprocal touch, only water.

Ursula said, "Things are a little dangerous at the temple."

"My village is safe. You could come and live in my village, with me."

She tried to smile. "That is very kind of you, and were things different, I would take you up on it right away." He went to protest, but she said, "Just wait a moment. There is something important I have to tell you. And you must promise—you must *promise* not to make a public fuss. It will put you in terrible danger."

He listened without interrupting. When she was finished, Johannes stared with wide eyes and murmured, "You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"What do I do?"

"I really don't know."

"Can you help? You must be able to help," he said.

"Not safely, no. Chances are I'm being watched by Mriga at all hours. His guards will only follow me if I flee."

"I told you, come and stay in Hisarya."

"Things have gotten complicated and my people need me. Darling, I have to leave tonight with the high priestess."

"Leave for where?"

She pointed past him to the sky.

"Stay," he said. "Please."

She only smiled softly and shook her head.

He wanted to be sick. He wanted to forget. He wanted to go to the moksha fields and burn every last damn flower so his mind was small again. He shouted, "You made me this *thing*, this new *thing*. I look and see now. I hear and listen now. I'm sad in ways I never imagined. I can't sit still. I can't think straight. Some days I can't believe I'm alive and other days I don't want to be alive anymore. And you tell me what they're doing to *children* and expect me to just settle the thing myself? Don't leave me like this. You can't leave me like this."

"Please," Ursula said. "*Please* don't do anything that will put you in danger."

“When will I see you again?”

“You’ve become so very, very clever and you don’t even know it. You’ll use that cleverness for good, I know you will. You’ll find a way to fix all this.”

“Damn it,” he shouted. “I want to see you, I want to hold you.” Then, that part of his mind the moksha had touched whispered to him, and he repeated the whisper. “You’re not coming back, are you?”

She said, “Watch for golden comets and violet fire shooting into the sky tonight. That is how I’ll leave. I’ll be looking down on you. Look up at me.” Her reflection moved close to the water’s surface. She said, “I shan’t ever forget those nights in the fields or those nights on our cliff. I shan’t ever forget my very clever native.”

Johannes’ tears spoiled the flatness of the water. “I don’t care,” he said.

“And I would ask that you never forget me either.”

“I don’t care.”

“Johannes.”

He kicked the water. He picked up every rock he could find, hurled it into the water. He threw in sticks and branches and dirt, and when the ripples settled, the water was clear and Ursula was gone.

32.

Johannes went first to the village crèche. The children were having their lunch and Johannes whispered to the crèchemaster to pack up the children’s things and get them ready to leave the village.

“To go where?” the crèchemaster asked.

“As far away as possible.”

Next he went to the stables and told the hostlers and the farriers to prepare all the horses. They knew Johannes well and weren’t rude, but only nodded and did nothing.

He went to the scout hut and the distillery and the book cabin and finally the tavern. The barkeep at the tavern laughed in his face. Johannes slammed his fist down on the bar and addressed the late-afternoon drinkers.

“The children are not ascended to devahood as we’re told, but slaughtered like cattle.”

“Piss off,” a drunk muttered.

Johannes smashed a stool on the bar. “The thing has been explained to me on good authority. We give three more children away this evening. That’s three more children to the grave. I want you to meet me by the old well at three-quarter sun with your children and your things.”

There was a pause.

Someone laughed. Then everyone laughed.

Johannes took the closing bell from the bar and ran out into the street ringing it as hard as he could. “Out,” he yelled. “Out, out, out.”

Many stepped onto their porches and watched Johannes in silence.

“We haven’t much time and we need to get away now, for the sake of the children. They’ll be dead before next sunup if we don’t do something. Pack what you can carry and leave the rest. I’ll lead the village to safety.”

The parents sent their children back inside. Then the parents went back inside.

“Are you deaf?” Johannes yelled. He rang the bell louder still and ran about in the suburbs. No one came out of their yurts or paused in their work.

He returned to the main square.

Chief Eno stood in full military dress with several guards at his side. He said, “Now, what’s all this about?”

Johannes rang his bell over and over. “We have to leave. Lead the party if you like, I don’t care, but we have to leave.”

“Is that right?”

Two guards came at Johannes from behind. They bound his hands and beat and kicked him until he submitted to arrest.

33.

Bedpan water was thrown on Johannes and he woke in the detention hut; night. His head felt broken and his hands were chained.

Chief Eno sat opposite on a stool, his face lit jaggedly in candlelight. He said, “And so the sleeper awakes, in more senses than one.”

Johannes murmured wordlessly, his head in agony.

The chief said, “I had a dream about you and me, Johannes. I was a sheepdog and you were a sheep. You kept straying from the flock and then I’d come up your rear and give you a little nip and set you back in line. But one day you strayed too far and confused all the other sheep and they went running higgledy. And do you know what the farmer did to the sheep then? Cut them right between the eyes for poor behaviour. He cut the sheepdog for good measure too.”

Johannes tried to separate his hands, but the chains were bound very tight.

Chief Eno said, “The difference between a hero and a fool is nothing more than the bias of the biographer. And if you get your way, you’ll go down in history as neither, since there’ll be no village left to remember.”

“I know where the children go.”

The candle flame faltered, recovered.

Chief Eno said, “A Deva came to me too a long, long time ago. She was a wolf and her eyes were purple and bottomless. We fell in love, of course. She fancied herself a saviour and told me of the great societies and inventions of my ancestors. She told me what she claimed was the true history of her people and our people. That was all very interesting.” He produced a pipe and began packing it slowly. “She was killed by her Devan kin for that, and my village received the luda disease. The whole village went gravewards, including my family. Neither the sheep nor the sheepdog are to fraternise with the shepherds.”

Johannes muttered, “You told me it was some other man who brought the plague to your village.”

“And you told me you’d keep in line with all the other sheep.”

Chief Eno took great pains lighting his pipe. The smoke was purple, and smelled unmistakably of moksha. With sudden glee in his eyes the chief said, “Well there it was, the Myriad of Man, and so humankind had built itself the mightiest of societies. Death was killed and ignorance bid goodnight, left by the backdoor never to be seen again. Every shackle was removed and off we went for the stars inside glittering machines.

Spacefaring was not the nihilistic fiasco many fearful thinkers had warned of. All was golden."

He blew out a fug of purple, spiced smoke and put his face through the smoke and leered at Johannes. "Those clever folk made themselves into things that were not folk, into things that did not age, that did not sleep, that did not sweat or fail. They outdid their own mythologies. And one day they woke to find in the midst of their play that they had ascended to godly realms of godly capacity. These new gods presented as the animals of old and could step from one side of the world to the other in no time at all. They dressed as holymen and holywomen, and they wielded holy staffs of immoderate fire."

The candle burned desperately down towards its wick.

"They used that fire. They anointed themselves the kings and queens of everything, and they kept those little germs around, their ancestors, their little native prototypes, if only to remind them how humble were their beginnings. So here we are, destined to toil as simple farmers of the holy flower upon which the gods' omnipotence depends."

Johannes tried to concentrate on his breathing as Ursula had taught him, yet all he could think of was the pain in his head.

Chief Eno said, "Yes, I was the young man who sent hundreds to their graves. When all that was done, when the she-wolf was dead and my village along with it, the shepherds themselves came down from on high. They offered me a position as chief, with all the moksha I wanted, knowing I would never endanger folk again, knowing I'd never fraternise with the shepherds again." He produced a small pot. He removed the lid and put the pot before Johannes' nose. It smelled like pepper. "They call it contramoksha. I mix it into the water supply. Keeps the high thoughts down low, and the low thoughts lower still."

Johannes muttered, "And you tell the villagefolk the moksha flowers are deadly. . ."

"Clearly you have a natural aptitude for leadership."

Johannes spat on the floor. "You're twisted wrong. What do they give you for all this? A tickle under the chin now and then?"

"I get to keep my life. You all get to keep yours. Strength in obedience. A ruler must be wise enough to know his ignorance and unblinded to blind obedience. Who doesn't have masters? For us it is the gods. For the gods, it

is nature. True liberation is through the recognition of one's unopposable oppressors." Children's giggles rang out from beyond the hut. "Well now, I see you have imbibed enough moksha of late to wake a little from your slumber. Is it so good, knowing? Is it so much better, *seeing*? The child longs for the responsibilities of adulthood. The adult, crushed by those responsibilities, longs only to be a child again." He put a hand on Johannes' shoulder. "Those you subjected to your little moksha experiments will return to their old selves soon enough. I will personally preside over their re-education. And, if you never smell the flowers again and drink your contramoksha, you too can go back to your old mind, to the fields, to lovely sleep and lovely dreams."

"Or?"

Chief Eno shrugged. "Faced with a gammy leg no man relishes the thought of having it chopped off, yet he knows it is best for the body. This village is a body and I the doctor, and I do not relish the thought of chopping you off, gammy leg, but it is incumbent upon me to do that which will save the patient." He leaned in close. "Will you heal, gammy leg, or turn gangrenous and necessitate the knife?"

Johannes shook his head.

"Well then."

Without ceremony Chief Eno emptied the moksha embers from his pipe on Johannes' head and left.

Johannes called out for Ursula.

She did not come.

34.

So it was that Anaximander's search for ultimate truth had become famous across Serdika. He could no longer venture into towns for sustenance without causing a stir. He resigned himself instead, one final time, to the forest.

He surrendered his optimism. He surrendered his pessimism. He surrendered his searching for wisemen and wisewomen.

What had the theoreticians known of beauty?

What had the mystics known of science?

He saw suddenly that there was no sense in extremes, intuited there must be some middle way between sterile description of the world, and blind celebration of it also—a sturdy ledge of salvation between the pits of piety and the false floorboards of scientism. There, surely, lay the meta-yes, the final, indisputable truth of being to which all other explanations and affirmations were subservient.

After searching about in the forest, he located a modest tree and determined he would sit at its base until he either found the meta-yes, or died. And if he should die without knowing everything, well, better that than to continue living with the constant blight of knowing nothing.

He sat in full lotus and entered into deep contemplation.

He listened to his breath for many hours, to the processes beneath his breath, the inflation and deflation of his lungs.

He listened to the molecules of air within his lungs, to the atoms within those molecules, to the song of fields and interactions beneath those atoms. . .

Towards evening a towering mechanical spider approached Anaximander's tree. Down from it climbed Praxia, the finest engineer in the galaxy.

Great Anaximander, she said. I have heard of your quest to discover the true meaning of the world. I believe you to be a mind of unmatched metaphysical clarity. I should like to offer you a position at the largest matter laboratory in the Myriad of Man. You may indulge every scientific whim, utilise millions of researchers, build whatever you like.

Anaximander said, Might I construct a machine that could reveal the mechanism of the ultimate Is?

Praxia replied, No machine could do that, my lord.

Anaximander said, Then I wish you well.

Praxia returned to her spider and was gone.

Next Anaximander listened to his thoughts and the brain architecture they rested upon. He listened to his neurons and the millions of years of biological evolution beneath them.

Back into time and time before time, prior to tribes and organisms and primordial ocean vents, prior to worlds and stars; the birth of space and

duration from which all things sprang. . .

Towards midnight a floating craft of solid gold set down beside Anaximander's tree. Out of it stepped Abaci, the richest merchant in the galaxy.

Great Anaximander, he said. I have heard of your quest to discover true spiritual wealth. I believe you to be a speaker many would pay good money to listen to. I should like to assist you in becoming the foremost teacher in the Myriad of Man, by which you will take your place as the richest citizen our empire has ever known.

Anaximander said, Is there a sum of money I might pay reality to reveal the mechanism of the ultimate Is?

Abaci replied, No sum could do that, my lord.

Anaximander said, Then I wish you well.

Abaci returned to his craft and was gone.

Anaximander continued in his contemplation.

He had been to the bottom of nature and the top of nature.

Now he only sat and listened to the forest about him, allowing each sensation to pass through his mind and leave it.

The rustling of the leaves.

The creaking of the branches.

The unsung, thankless miracle of being. . .

Towards sunrise a great parade entered Anaximander's clearing, many hundreds of men and women throwing incense and lasers all about. The crowd bowed and fell silent. From the crowd emerged an elephant. The elephant sank to its knees, and down from the elephant hobbled Lord Perun, Anaximander's father.

My son, Lord Perun said. I have heard of your quest to discover the foundation of the world. I believe you to be wise beyond even the greatest sages in my kingdom. I was wrong to doubt you.

He bent to his son on crooked, knocking knees. He said, I am old and sickly. I am not long for this world. I believe you to have the makings of a great king. The Myriad of Man shall be yours come my passing.

Anaximander said, And with the full power of the throne of the Myriad of Man at my disposal, do you think I might command reality to reveal the

mechanism of the ultimate Is?

Lord Perun said, There was never, and will never be a title or office powerful enough to issue that command.

Anaximander said, Then I wish you well.

Lord Perun raised a hand to strike his son. Anaximander presented his cheek.

The king only bowed his head and crawled back up the elephant. Soon Lord Perun and the royal parade were gone.

Free of the temptations of clinging, wealth, and power, Anaximander's will was pure then. He continued to sit by his tree and contemplate.

Day came. Night followed. Day again. Night again.

He remembered his life as a helpless child and an arrogant youth. He thought ahead to the many billions of years to come after his death when he would no longer have any part in the happenings of the universe at all.

He grew weak and dehydrated. His breathing became shallow. He turned pale and drew near to death.

His body was agony, left in existence only to perceive the subsequent lashes of pain followed by pain. At the apex of the pain, just as he was ready to cry out to reality to show itself, just as he was about to give in to helpless weeping, to beg for insight, to yell, *Give me the answer damn you, or else I shall die,* he instead only withdrew from the desire to know.

He surrendered his mind and body completely, perfectly, to reality.

He renounced his name.

He renounced his intellect.

He renounced his lifelong, unspoken conviction that there existed a duality between himself and the world.

And, at last, he saw the Is; the realm of bejewelled order that sat beneath the visible world and above it, the machinations and interactions that had birthed the atoms, that had birthed the elements, that had birthed the compounds, that had birthed his body and the stars and the galaxies, all of it dancing about in such a way that presented as *Anaximander*.

He opened his eyes.

The world had not changed, yet the world was entirely new.

It sang of a constant mystery and nothing was self-evident.

Though Anaximander could pin names to these things about him, to *green*, to *sky*, to *soft*, he saw suddenly that they were all just convenient nouns and adjectives to describe a hiding, ever-present unity, the million masks of the perfect Is.

Green was but a wavelength of light. There was no true *greenness* in the world.

Sky was but an absence in which to put things.

Soft indicated only a lack of friction, an ease of electromagnetism.

He turned his gaze on himself. And, like the beggar who finds he was sat atop gold bars all along, Anaximander saw nature's fingerprints on every millimetre of his thoughts—saw, of course, that he was nature itself.

In this way all dualisms were reconciled, in matter and thought.

In this way the road to truth was laid.

In this way he was awake.

35.

Johannes fell between sleep and waking, head throbbing.

Through the smudged window of the detention hut he could spy the villagefolk readying the three children for their departure.

He desperately searched the hut for anything of use. There on the ground was Chief Eno's discarded moksha ash. Johannes collected the ash in his mouth and swallowed.

A ceremonial horn blared. Beyond the window, the villagefolk had fallen into a congregation, the three chosen children positioned at the front. All approached the highgrass and waited.

Johannes thumped the wall of the detention hut over and over. He smashed the window open with his forehead and pushed his head through the shards and shouted as loudly as he could, "Stop! Death! Stop!"

A few folk turned around. A guard jogged over to the detention hut.

"What are you doing, idiot?" the guard said.

Johannes continued yelling.

He felt the moksha fragments burning in his stomach, the fire spreading to his extremities. His highmind began to expand, though it produced no new possibilities, only more outcomes to be fearful of.

The horn blew again and Mriga's effigy of blue fire rose over the crops.

"Stop. *Stop!*"

The guard entered the detention hut, drew his sword. Johannes threw a headbutt at the guard and managed to knock him over. Johannes lurched off on a mad sprint, chains flailing, racing for the congregation, the guard trailing close behind.

In the distance, two towering Devas appeared from the highgrass; a shark and a cat. The villagefolk bowed before them.

The moksha tingles were all across Johannes' body now, his highmind sparking, looking for any approach that wasn't madness or violence.

"This is murder," Johannes yelled. Closer then, "This is *murder*. The children will be slaughtered, hung up and slaughtered."

The trailing guard got Johannes in a chokehold and dragged him to the ground.

Chief Eno bowed to the shark and the cat. "My lords, the madman of the village, I do apologise. He has opted for execution."

"What are his crimes?" the cat said.

"I have communicated them to Lord Mriga in full. Principally: inciting rebellion. Please, let us continue with the ceremony."

The cat examined Johannes amusedly. "Let the madman talk."

"My lord. . ." Chief Eno said.

"Let him talk."

A pause. Chief Eno nodded. The guard let Johannes go.

Johannes caught his breath, met the eyes of the staring villagefolk. The moksha was peaking, and his highmind had stabilised. He said to the Devan cat, "In accordance with the seventeenth edict, *On the punishment and execution of antisocial natives*, I request a fair trial."

Chief Eno said, "There are no trials for breachers of the peace, Johannes."

The cat and the shark conferred in the Devan tongue, laughing to themselves. They looked Johannes over as one might a pet that has learned

to perform some trick untypical of its species.

The cat said, “If only for the sake of entertainment, a trial you shall have.”

36.

The cat said with a smile, “The temple of Venerable Lord Mriga nominates Chief Eno as its prosecutor.” It revealed glinting jade teeth and peered at Johannes. “The defendant may also appoint a representative.”

Johannes said, “I choose to represent myself.”

The cat and the shark giggled. The cat said, “That is not a wise course of action.”

“I will represent myself.”

The cat shrugged. “So be it.” It conferred with Chief Eno for a moment in whispers, then said, “In opening, the temple of Venerable Lord Mriga charges the native male with one count of conspiracy to incite violence, and one count of conspiracy to sabotage the moksha production process. How does the native male plead?”

Johannes murmured, “I deny the charges.”

The cat said, “Chief Eno, will you recount to the native male and witnesses here present what it was that transpired?”

Chief Eno said, “My lord, this afternoon he attempted to disband the entire village, crying foul of the gods, crying foul of the edicts.”

“Will you also recount what it was you told me you saw on one occasion in the moksha fields?”

“That of Johannes in sexual congress with a Deva, my lord.”

Many villagefolk gasped.

The cat said, “You are quite sure this is what you saw?”

“I am quite sure.”

“We shall add one count of lewdness to the charges then. Chief Eno, will you remind us what the explicit penalty is for just one of these charges if deemed genuine?”

“Execution, my lord.”

Johannes tried to meet the eyes of the villagefolk. Only those he had taken into the moksha looked back.

Chief Eno said, “Does the native deny the charges?”

Johannes said, “No, I suppose I don’t.”

More murmurs.

The chief said, “Furthermore the native is aware of the primacy of the seventy-three holy edicts?” Johannes nodded. “And yet he contradicts them in a diabolical fashion, sexual congress with Devas being among the most heinous. Does the defence have any further comments before we conclude the proceedings?”

Johannes said, “No.”

The cat said, “Then, in accordance with the Canon of Morals of the Golden—”

Johannes called inwardly to his highmind as Ursula had taught him. He entreated it to not only look, but see.

There, the villagefolk, their horrified open mouths.

There, Chief Eno’s pocked face and unreadable countenance.

There, the land and stars.

Johannes’ highmind began to whisper. He repeated what it said aloud. “I would like to bring a charge against the temple of Venerable Lord Mriga.”

The cat smirked. “The native male is the *defendant.* He is in no position to initiate his own trial.”

“Considering what you intend to do to me in a moment, there isn’t going to be another chance, I should think.”

The cat and the shark conferred. Then the cat said playfully, “What is the nature of your *accusation*?”

“The slaughter of infants.”

More murmurs and gasps. Someone in the crowd threw a rock at Johannes. Many more kicked dirt at him.

The cat said, “Let the mad native speak.”

Johannes said quickly, “I have it on good authority that the children are not ascended to devahood as claimed. Instead they are slaughtered and served as a delicacy at the temple.”

“Why?” someone called out.

Silence. Johannes had no answer.

The cat said neutrally, “Because their flesh accumulates much moksha from their work in the flowers. Once extracted, the concentrated moksha can be used in various experiments far too complicated to explain to you. It is also quite delicious.”

The crowd stared in disbelief.

The cat said, “Chief Eno, what is your response?”

Chief Eno collected himself and said, “Johannes, do you believe a man smarter than a mouse?”

“Of course.”

“Would you consider it a crime to eat a mouse?”

“No.”

“And do you consider a Deva smarter than a man?”

“Probably.”

“Then how is *that* hierarchy different? Slaughter of an equal is barbarism. Slaughter of a life inferior is quite natural, such has it been for thousands of years. We live in hierarchies. Do you deny that?”

Johannes waited for the moksha to speak again, and when it spoke he said, “Is intelligence the only measure of a species’ worth?”

“No,” Chief Eno said. “There are many considerations. Sentience, moral virtue, spiritual qualities and so on.”

“And the Devas are superior in all these things?”

“That is a fact.”

“And if a creature possesses less sentience, and moral virtue, and spiritual qualities, you consider them cattle, no?”

The chief said, “What else could they be? Cattle is a relative noun for those creatures below that creature using the noun.”

Johannes said, “Then why, my lord, don’t Devas eat their own children? They are intellectually inferior to adult Devas, no?”

He scanned the crowd. There was anger building on the villagefolk’s faces, though most of it still clearly directed at Johannes. He looked to those he had taken into the moksha—Petur and Didi, old Giorgi and the others, and there on their faces, unmistakably, were frowns of thought.

Chief Eno said, “Devan children are still Devan, and divine by definition.”

Johannes said, “That is circular logic, sir.”

“*Circular logic?*” Chief Eno cocked his head. “Why, your moksha indulgence has given you weapons of rhetoric you don’t even know how to use.”

Someone called from the crowd, “Isn’t moksha poisonous?”

Chief Eno said in a clipped mutter, “That’s irrelevant.”

Emboldened then, Johannes said, “What if the Devas one day encountered a species with more virtue and intelligence than themselves? Would it be acceptable to treat the Devas as cattle? Would it be acceptable to eat Devas?”

A pause. “Would it?” someone murmured from the crowd.

“Time grows short,” the cat said. “We will close the proceedings here.”

“Agreed,” Chief Eno said.

Johannes stood shakily to his feet. He shouted directly to the crowd, “The worth of an animal isn’t conditional on the tricks it can perform. The question is not can they reason, nor can they talk, but can they *suffer*. If we are animals, fine. But we’re animals capable of goodness, capable of sense-making, and most importantly, capable of suffering. And if our masters wish to ignore these qualities simply because our children taste delicious, that is their prerogative. But our masters should acknowledge our prerogative too, and that is to resist.”

Many were staring at Johannes, not only the moksha-enlightened folks, but the cheesemakers and beerhands, the farriers and clerks.

The cat said in a bored voice, “You’ve had your speech. It was an adequate performance. Proceedings adjourned. The sentence stands as it was.”

The guard smacked Johannes back down to his knees and produced a dagger. Many villagefolk covered their eyes.

They will take others into the fields, Johannes thought. *When I am gone, they will take others.*

He locked eyes with Chief Eno. Chief Eno’s face betrayed a hint of the compassion a father might afford his wayward son. Then, his face hardened again, he made the gesture of a dagger across the throat.

The guard put the tip of his dagger to Johannes' neck.

Chief Eno nodded.

Ursula stepped out of the air in bear-form. She roared loudly enough to pierce the eardrums of many present. She swiped at the guard wielding the dagger and the guard fell down and put his hands to his eyes and blood poured through his fingers. She pushed Chief Eno off his feet and swiped at his face and bit off his arm. The crowd exploded into screaming anarchy.

A guard threw his sword back to strike Ursula and she bit off his head. Two more guards ran for her, swords drawn. She spat the severed head at one and he went down. She got the other with her claws, ripping a large portion of his face off.

She passed a paw over Johannes' chains and they were broken then. She roared, "We have to marshal everyone. We must get to high ground. Now."

A band of Mriga's temple guards walked from the air; centaurs, lions, wasps, a menagerie. They circled about Ursula with cords of rope that fell in and out of Vex and Samsara. A centaur came at her with his cord. She parried, stepped through Vex, then produced her own cord, tying it about his throat and squeezing his head off. Another centaur reached for her shoulder. She ran into Vex and reappeared above the centaur, grabbing him in a hug and tearing out his jugular vein with her teeth.

The crowd ran shrieking all about, many heading back to their houses, others for the village outskirts. Some were turning on the Devas, grabbing their tails, pulling their ears.

Johannes caught sight of Chief Eno stumbling for the village boundary, blood falling out of him. A few more steps and he fell to his knees. He reached for some inscrutable thing above, then collapsed and didn't move.

The temple Devas advanced into the village, more walking out of nothing; crocodiles, tigers, chimpanzees—squid that swam through the air as though it were water.

Ursula roared, "To high ground, now!" Those villagers who had not fled inside their homes only continued running about screaming.

A Deva lion bound the village crèche with his cord, and with a single pull the roof was gone.

A Deva tiger made for the stables.

A Deva squid swam about the village collecting folk in its tentacles and tying them to a Deva crocodile's back.

The village erupted into red fire and blue fire. Buildings exploded, collapsed. Blood lined the pavements.

Johannes fell to his knees. Ursula put him on her back. "Close your eyes," she shouted.

He closed his eyes. He felt a chilling wind on his face, heard screaming eldritch echoes.

When he opened his eyes again he found the two of them were on a hill overlooking the village, hundreds of metres away now. "I'll come back for you," Ursula said and vanished into the air.

Johannes fell down with the shock of the strange flight and the agony of his head and slipped into unconsciousness.

37.

Johannes came to at sunrise, Ursula standing over him. She was holding a baby. Her fur was covered in blood and part of her left ear was missing.

"The village?" Johannes murmured.

Ursula shook her head.

Over her shoulder shot many golden comets that trailed violet fire.

The comets ascended into the sky and then were gone.

38.

In the Year of the Red Tesseract, Lord Perun, Anaximander's father, undertook a walk among the palace gardens of Serdika to inspect the fine things growing there. During the walk he suffered a seizure and was recovered by his guards. Many hours later he awoke frail and confused.

He reported that in his seizure he had witnessed a vision, a glove. The glove was beautiful, encrusted with rubies and diamonds and sapphires, and it span eternally in the void. A hand began to emerge from the glove,

pulling out very slowly so that the glove did not deflate. The hand was perfectly manicured and burning a brilliant white. The index finger pointed directly at Lord Perun.

Lord Perun knew two things then. Firstly, the seizure had damaged him greatly and he would die soon. Secondly, he must talk with his son at once.

He sent a battalion of royal guards out into the forests and villages to search for Anaximander. As they searched, Lord Perun's health declined. He struggled to breathe and his mind was clouded with many strange fancies.

Finally, in the darkest minute of Lord Perun's darkest hour, a thin and ragged specimen of a man appeared at his doorway, hair grown to his feet, wearing only a blue potato sack. It took Lord Perun several moments to recognise the beggar as his son.

What has become of you, son? Lord Perun asked, weeping.

Anaximander explained that he had perfected a method of contemplation powerful enough to reveal oneself as mere nature. In the mind realising it was only universe experiencing universe, the need to conquer and dominate vanished entirely. After spending long enough in this state, one could see down through the murk of consciousness to the bed of the cosmic river. There, the ultimate Is revealed itself.

Lord Perun did not understand the notion, but understood at least that Anaximander had found a place of peace, and that much made him happy.

My son, Lord Perun said. I am soon to die.

I know it, Anaximander said.

Lord Perun continued, I have done my best to keep the Myriad of Man unified, but the attempt was unsuccessful. Many of the outer worlds have sought the great foundation of things, found nothing, and turned against everything. Many of the inner worlds are stoking a civil war. You are my only child, and so when I die, the responsibility falls to you to take my place as king of the empire, whether you wish it or not. I offered this thing to you once, but you refused. I offer it to you once again hoping you will not refuse again. Do you believe you are wise enough to rule, my son?

I am only wise to the infinite scope of my ignorance, Anaximander replied.

Lord Perun said, Then that will be quite sufficient. The palace staff will do as you request. The population will do as you request. Do you accept this thing?

Anaximander's eyes sparkled. His face shone and his robe burned blue. The light of the chamber dimmed so that he appeared the only light in the world.

He said silently and with infinite volume, Mind is only matter that knows it is matter. Matter is only mind that is yet to become mind. If I am to inherit your kingdom, those two facts will inform every decision. There will be no commands or thou shalt nots, no armies, no executions. In recognition of these changes, Serdika shall be renamed *Bodhi*, the ancient word for enlightenment. The principal aim of the species will be to build a single great mirror which all will look into, and see only universe looking back.

Lord Perun smiled, the life draining from him. He said, So be it. Many billions of lives are in your keeping now.

He pulled his son close and kissed him on both cheeks. He whispered, The destiny of the world is on your back. Oh do not drop it. . .Oh do not drop it. . .

II

There was once a small spring. The spring was so persistent that over many years it eroded the land about it such that the spring became a stream. It felt pride at this.

The stream persisted and after many more years it became a river.

In time the river became an ocean and stretched across the world from horizon to horizon.

Witness me, the ocean said. I am mighty. I am eternal.

The sun, who had been watching all this time said, Be careful, ocean. For though you reach across the world now, you still derive from a single spring.

Ha! the ocean said. I am an ocean, what need have I for a spring!

And the sun did blaze.

And the spring did dwindle.

And the land became a desert once again.

- Excerpts from **The Metaphysical Sutras of Lord Anaximander**

1.

Ursula and Johannes walked from the village of Hisarya, silent as it was now.

They travelled for many hours through the brush and scrub, over bogs and up hills. Ursula seemed to know where they were going and Johannes found no reason to question her.

With evening coming on, Madeleine flew overhead, circled a few times, and descended.

“Hello, my darling,” Ursula said wearily.

Madeleine whirled about, cyan, red, yellow: *There’s no one left.*

“What is she saying?” Johannes asked.

“We should press on.”

Close to night, they watched dim lights in a valley below—a native village.

Ursula stayed on the outskirts with the baby and Johannes hiked down into the village. He was met by a guard so old he could barely carry his sword.

Johannes recounted what had happened to Hisarya, explained that he and Ursula were lost and only wanted some water and possibly some cooking tools.

The guard fetched Johannes some water, a pot and ladle, and a little wine.

Ursula and Johannes hiked on.

They stopped finally for the night in the clearing of a small wood. They shared the wine in silence, the bottle a toy in Ursula’s great paw.

Johannes nodded to the baby. “Where did you find him?”

“In the village crèche.”

“The parents?”

Ursula said nothing.

They slept holding each other, the baby nestled in between.

2.

They set off at sunrise.

It was a difficult hike. Johannes gave the last of their water to the baby and they did not come across more.

They talked in short declarations. *The sun is hot here. The ground has horse prints. We're going in circles.*

Just before midday they spied birds in the distance. "Get down," Ursula whispered. They crouched in the underbrush. The birds circled around the mountains. Closer, Johannes saw the birds wore blue robes and carried Devan fighting cords in their mouths.

The birds called out in Staritae, the ritual Devan tongue: *Oh wayward bear, where are you? We but long to wish you well. . .*

3.

They did not stop for lunch or dinner, and kept walking far past sunset, then into the next sunrise. Here and there they found moksha growing in little wild patches, and Ursula gathered much of it in her robe.

At last they spied a body of water in the distance. They neared to find it was a channel. On the other side of the channel was a collection of glass buildings taller than any Johannes had ever seen before, glowing green.

"Another city?" Johannes said. "Built by men and women?"

Ursula nodded. She gave the baby to him and ate a few moksha flowers. She took many deep breaths and her eyelids fell half-closed.

She offered her paw and Johannes took it. She said, "Cover your eyes and cover the baby's. Hold your breath and don't exhale until we reach the other side." She counted them to three and they walked.

Even through Johannes' closed eyes the world fell into a nightmare of bent light and impossible angles and he could not catch his breath. A moment later they were standing on the other side of the channel before the dwarfing spires of the city.

Ursula checked the baby and kissed him. She checked Johannes and kissed him too.

The scale of the city made Johannes feel an ant. Even the smaller structures were fifty folk high at least, some windowless, some entirely transparent.

They climbed a hill and came to a nest of more recognisable buildings, houses of a sort. The houses had doors and windows, and the walls were not transparent but made of some kind of polished stone.

Ursula took the baby and turned him about in her paws. She said softly, “Well now, where shall we live?”

The baby cooed and gurgled.

“I like that one,” Johannes said, pointing to a two-storey house with the remains of a garden out front.

“Me too,” Ursula said. “And does the small human hold any objections to this?”

The baby appeared to hold no objections.

And so that was their home.

4.

In the morning Ursula was a woman again. The top part of her ear was still missing. She fed the baby, made love to Johannes, then went off on errands.

Johannes got up and explored the house. Some objects were recognizable—glass basins for washing, though no water came through the pipes. Other objects were beyond guessing the function of—crystalline strips that hummed to themselves, and a mirror that did not display Johannes’ body to him, but his skeleton.

Ursula returned and they planted what she promised were roses in the garden. They cleaned the chairs and beat the cushions. They found fresh sheets in the cellar and made the beds.

Johannes constructed a hammock of bed sheets so the baby could sleep outside. Ursula washed the windows of the house and made many of the strange crystalline objects glow gently blue by performing hand gestures.

When the house felt finally like a home Johannes asked, “Where are we?”

Ursula said, “I saw it on a map in Mriga’s temple, some old historical curiosity.”

They put the baby to bed and went out to explore the city.

Telescopes, mechanical arms, crystal pedestals; statues of native men and women that changed position every few minutes. The statues did not wear blue robes like Devas, but garments of silk and liquid glass, their faces sporting veins of metal.

Johannes sat before the statues wide-eyed.

People. Tall and proud and powerful once.

People. . .

Madeleine descended from out of the clouds and floated at head height. She inquired as to what Ursula and Johannes were going to do next. Ursula admitted they did not know, but they might stay in the city a while.

There are other spyles on this world, Madeleine span.

“Friendly?” Ursula asked.

Madeleine did not reply, but only shot off into the distance. Some minutes later she returned, accompanied by fifteen or so other spheres and cubes. They formed a ring about Ursula and Johannes and moved close to examine them.

“Hello,” Johannes said and gave a little wave.

The entourage of spyles brushed up against the couple, nuzzling them in the fashion of cats.

We do not own these cities; nobody does, a cubic spyle span. *Still, it would be an honour to help you settle here.*

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” Ursula said.

She kissed Madeleine’s white exterior and Madeleine purred delightedly.

5.

The spyles got to work on the city. They could take many shapes and turned themselves into brushes to clean the streets and coarse clouds of particles to clean the windows.

They brought bags of rice from afar and reported the location of a well nearby.

Ursula and Johannes hiked out to the well and found it was in good order.

On their return they came upon a lake. The water's surface refracted the daylight, transmuting it into rainbows.

"What is this?" Johannes asked.

"A gate into Vex," Ursula said grimly. "It's probably leftover from one of the early Myriad of Man experiments with four-dimensional space."

Johannes bent to put his head into the not-water. Ursula pulled him back, said, "Venerable one, you don't want that. Believe me."

6.

One evening Madeleine offered to care for the baby a while if Ursula and Johannes might like to relax. They accepted gratefully and put the baby down to sleep.

They climbed the high hill to the west and looked out over the city; the towers and domes shining sleepily green.

"You chose my village over your people," Johannes said. "I've stolen you from your folk, haven't I?"

Perhaps Ursula did not hear the question because she only ate a few moksha petals and covered Johannes' eyes. When she withdrew her hand she was a bear once again.

Johannes found he had changed also. He possessed enormous wings and a beak and webbed feet—now a gigantic, regal swan.

Ursula took his wing in her paw and they ran through the woods bawling and whistling. When they reached the cliff beyond the forest, Ursula scaled a tree in a few leaps and waited at the top.

Johannes ran at the cliff. He unfurled his great wings and soared into the air. With only a small shift in weight he could turn this way or the other, or dive, or climb. He beat his wings and rose over the forest and their house and the glass city.

He swooped back down and landed on a branch close to Ursula. He said, “Where do you come from?”

“Far away, long ago. . .” Ursula said.

“Where?”

“A constellation of stars called Leo.”

“That seems a fine name for the baby.”

She kissed Johannes on the beak.

7.

Ursula and Johannes spent the next morning exploring the inner suburbs of the city; old bakeries and meeting halls and laboratories. At last they located an ancient control room. The buttons and dials were labelled in a language just close enough to Devan for Ursula to make some educated guesses.

After a great deal of experimentation with the controls, the two of them emerged to find the air shimmering all about the circumference of the town. A *leptonic aegis*, Ursula called it. She said, “On Gearheart, my world, we use something similar. It blocks four-dimensional creatures. Mriga’s congregation won’t get through it in a hurry.”

“And if somehow they do?” Johannes asked.

“Then I’ll kill them.”

8.

Work, rest, and lovemaking. That was winter.

Near the beginning of spring Ursula woke Johannes early in the morning with a concerned expression. She asked Johannes if he knew what it meant when a woman missed her period.

Johannes nodded.

However, Ursula explained quickly, if she really was going to have a baby it would mean no further use of her devamagic while pregnant.

“Why?” Johannes said.

“Because devamagic requires moksha, and taking moksha harms babies when they’re growing. If Mriga and his congregation get through the aegis barrier somehow, we’ll be defenceless.”

“What about the spyles?”

“They’ve sworn to do no harm under any conditions. It’s their most sacred promise.” Quietly she added, “I could still get rid of the baby now if we wanted, with devamagic.”

“It’s not my decision to make. Can’t you use devamagic without moksha?”

“It’s complicated.” And though she meant to leave the thing there, Johannes shot her a glance that said, *I am not the stupid animal you met months ago by the lake. My mind is bigger now, and that’s your fault. Don’t take me to new lands and hide all the maps.*

Ursula said, “Look. Moksha keeps us in Vex. It’s not just some transcendent realm where we go for the occasional holiday; it’s where we live. I told you all this.”

“But you look three-dimensional,” Johannes said.

“And you would look two-dimensional to a creature that only lived in two dimensions. We can still reach down into Samsara, into three dimensions, to live, sleep, eat—”

“Make love.”

“Yes, that too. But the *essence* of us lives in Vex, that is the secret of devamagic. To us, changing forms and disappearing is no more difficult than running or dancing is for you. It only looks magical because you can’t manipulate yourself in Vex.”

“And if you stop taking moksha?”

“Vex is unbearable without it, the geometry is too strange. We fall back into Samsara, back to threespace flesh. Natives again.”

Johannes only repeated, “It’s not my decision to make.”

9.

They passed a week without mentioning the matter. The island was so secluded they had both forgotten that life mostly consists of well-meant decisions with hideous consequences.

One morning Johannes heard Ursula vomiting and went to check on her. Between moans of agony she asked over and over that she be left alone.

Several days of this, and at last she came to find him again. Johannes was napping in the hammock with Leo on his chest. Ursula moved the baby to his cot and asked that Madeleine watch over him a while.

When Johannes woke, he saw that Ursula's irises were round like his now. She led him into the forest.

They ran about not as bear and swan, but humans; whooping, singing, swinging from tree to tree, pouncing, tickling one another so hard they almost cried.

Exhausted finally, they laid in the dirt holding each other and watched the galaxy above.

Ursula took Johannes' hand and put it on her stomach.

10.

Ursula woke to the smell of burning wood. Climbing from bed with swollen feet and tummy plump, she found Johannes in the study. Beyond the window, beyond the channel, on the mainland, was a rising cloud of black and yellow smoke.

Ursula took up binoculars and glassed the mainland. Amid the smoke were silhouettes of humans running wildly about. Larger silhouettes trailed close behind them—lions, monkeys, wolves, all robed in blue.

"We're in no position to help yet," Ursula murmured.

"Surely we can do *something*?"

She closed the curtains.

11.

Johannes built a bed for Leo and the child took to it fine.

Ursula was usually too exhausted to help with the housework, partly with pregnancy, partly still with moksha withdrawal.

Johannes built her a rocking chair and set it on the porch. She spent much of the time there lolling back and forth with Leo sleeping on her chest.

By spring most of her hurt and vomiting had become her primary pastime. On several occasions Johannes witnessed her attempting to reach through the air for an object across the room only to remember her condition and groan.

She tended to the flowers in the garden, though she could not quite remember the theoretics that animated them.

She made love to Johannes and found her mind stayed in the room, in her skin.

Johannes' humour was funnier to her now. She realised she had been forever holding herself back in her devahood, laughing harder than she should have at his jokes, being a little kinder than she should have with his follies.

She was all giddy with love and forgetful of the transcendent truths—which, she thought, was really what love should be anyway.

She saw no point hiding the secrets of Vex from Johannes now. She was carrying their child after all.

She told him of the million Devan worlds; of the hundred, million palaces and temples that lived half in Samsara, half in Vex.

She told him of how the entire galaxy hummed with life and will—billions of souls engaged in meditation, and exploration, and lovemaking.

She told him of how she had once been a scientist (though neglected to mention the extent of her fame), of how she had predicted the fall of civilisation, of how she had once striven to engineer a new, more powerful strain of moksha to stave off the end of everything.

She told him of how she'd perfected the substance, only to realise the last thing a burning town needed was more wood.

Johannes tapped her head. "And your secret moksha recipe—is it still in there?"

"Yes," she said. "And only there."

12.

Exploring one of the city's ancient control rooms, Ursula chanced upon a transmitter. It was a Myriad of Man space-bending device, laughably primitive by Devan standards. The Casimir battery was almost depleted, but there was enough energy left for one, perhaps two transmissions.

She configured the antennae for Phoebe and wrote the message in vexscript.

Strictly for the eyes of High Priestess Lady Theodora of the Golden Council.

Dispense with formalities. Urgent. *My lady.*

First, I offer my apologies for not joining your departure of Mriga's World. I could not abandon the native folk with a clear conscience.

Furthermore, sentimental. *I must inform you I am still alive, and currently beyond Mriga's clutches, or yet to be found at least.*

The primary matter. *I am attempting to construct a sanctuary on this world with the help of a local, though I fear the project can survive only so long. Mriga will dispense with us eventually.* **Plea for solidarity.** *I hereby formally request military assistance. Mriga's threat to the Golden Council remains as we discussed in your chamber that troubled night.* **Secondary, but not lesser matter.** *I trust you relayed the imminence of the bivnik effect to the Golden Council and they are now taking the matter seriously.*

In closing, reiteration for purposes of rhetoric. *I wait in anticipation of your kind offer of military intervention. Mriga's pacification should take no more than five council masters, which I believe can be spared, given the peacetime we currently enjoy.*

I look forward to your prompt response.

Yours,

Dean Ursula of Gearheart University

13.

The antennae sang out later that night, waking Ursula and Johannes. Johannes joined his lover this time in the control room.

The signal vector confirmed a reply from Phoebe.

Venerable Dean Ursula,

Formal, though not without sentiment. *It is with great regret I inform you that the Golden Council cannot take military action against Venerable Lord Mriga at this time.* **Conclusive.** *I wish you well in your sanctuary project.*

High Priestess Lady Theodora of the Golden Council

Ursula put her head in her hands.

"What is it?" Johannes asked.

"We're on our own."

"Why?"

"They don't want to endanger their precious moksha plantation."

"Then what do we do?"

"Darling, will you go back to bed? I'll join you in a minute, promise."

Alone again, Ursula repositioned the antennae for Gearheart University and wrote in threespace script this time.

Strictly for the eyes of Venerable Lord Lepus.

Mad rabbit,

I know what you're going to say. You told me not to come, and you're right. Do a little celebration dance if you want.

He's got the council paralysed now. He'll start trying to discredit our work publicly soon, I suppose. Don't send help here; he's too powerful and might already have perfected his own jhanamoksha. Here's what we'll do instead.

I hereby forfeit all rights and privileges of administration and appoint you as Dean of Gearheart University, to begin in the position with immediate effect. Congratulations etc. Assign as many scholars as you can to defence research. Execute the backup plan just as we designed it. Gearheart is bivnik's last hope now.

Oh, I'm pregnant by a native. He's honest and kind and you'd hate him.

Don't write back, the battery's almost dead on this side. I'll be home as soon as possible and I expect to find the university not destroyed.

U x

14.

Summer arrived. Ursula was often pale and quiet and did little else but sleep and get out of bed to vomit.

One morning Ursula and Johannes were descending the stairs when Ursula fainted. Johannes laid her down on the floor. She was sweating and very cold to the touch.

She came to and said, "You have to go to the mainland. I thought we could do it without help, but we can't."

"What do you need?"

"Beans, lentils, anything with iron, even meat."

"Do people need iron?"

Ursula fixed him with a look that said murder.

Johannes collected all the wood he could and took Ursula down to the water. Between vomiting, she instructed him in a weak voice how to build a boat.

His first attempt took the whole day, and it was lopsided and the hull let water in immediately.

Ursula yelled at the sky for a while.

Johannes took better care with the second attempt and afforded great attention to what Ursula described as the *principles of buoyancy*. The boat

was not elegant, but it floated.

Ursula instructed him how to make oars and that wasn't so difficult.

Finally, she taught him how to tell east and west by the sun's direction.

They kissed goodbye, and Johannes hugged Leo so tight he almost burst the boy.

He set off across the channel.

15.

The boat held up fine. Johannes scrambled onto the mainland and secured the boat.

He hiked into the woods.

He made his bed beneath the stars and watched the constellations.

Aquila, Lupus, Cassiopeia.

He remembered a time before Ursula when he had known no constellations.

He examined his hands and the bones beneath the skin.

Scaphoid, hamate, lunate.

Ursula had taught him these things too.

He knew the trees he slept beneath were red alders.

And that trees drank water from the soil.

And that water was made of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom.

And that atoms were made of electrons and quarks and apeirons.

His mind was full of many wonderful new things.

He saw Ursula sleeping in his imagination.

I've put no new things in her mind at all, he thought.

16.

In the morning Johannes spotted a native settlement in a valley. There was no sign of movement. He hiked down into the valley.

Many of the houses were sliced in two. Others were only charred remains. He found a body outside what appeared to be the stables. He found a pile of bodies by the tavern.

The food store hadn't been raided. Inside were many bags of beans and lentils and he slung several over his back. He located the pharmacy. It was still well stocked and he took bandages and painkillers. Leaving the pharmacy he noticed three figures tied to a house with a Devan fighting cord: an old man, a young man, and a young woman.

When Johannes approached the house, the old man opened his eyes. He began muttering wildly.

"It's all right! I can help," Johannes said.

The young man and young woman stirred. Johannes went to untie the cord and let them free.

"Don't," the young man whispered. "Please."

"Let me get you down," Johannes said.

The young man said, "They'll know. Don't."

Johannes cut the cord with his hunting knife. It frayed into Vex, vanishing, rematerialising. The old man fell to his knees. The blare of a trumpet rang out from the east.

"No, no, no," the young woman said.

Johannes cut the young man and young woman down. The trumpet rang out again and again, nearing.

Johannes carried the old man away from the village, the other two folk stumbling behind. They had almost reached the top of the hill when there came a roar from behind. Johannes pulled the folk down into the grass.

Below, a wolf and a buffalo stalked into view. The wolf had glass spears sticking from its back. Clearly visible atop the spears were human heads.

17.

Ursula was waiting with Leo on the beach when the boat returned. Johannes and the two younger folk pulled the boat from the water.

Johannes murmured, "This will take a little explaining."

Ursula kissed him on the mouth. “You did right. We can’t just keep the island to ourselves.”

In a heavy dialect the old man explained he was a priest, and this was his grandson, a farmer, and his grandson’s wife, a doctor. Ursula shook their hands, kissed their cheeks.

Johannes and the farmer hauled the sacks of vegetables back to the family home. The priest blessed their house with rosewater. The doctor helped Johannes start a fire for cooking.

Night came and they all sat out on the porch of the house and ate lentil soup, Leo sleeping on Johannes’ chest.

Ursula said, “Do you know why they destroyed your village?”

The doctor said, “Three days ago a man visited from another village, took us out into the flowers. People went crazy about this. The gods came next.”

“What was the name of the other village?”

“Hisarya.”

Ursula murmured to Johannes, “Why, you’ve started a revolution, venerable one. . .”

When the meal was done Johannes said to the new folk, “You can take any of these houses. We’ll show you how to use the old machines.”

The doctor said, “To live, here?”

“Yes, all of you, if you’d like to,” Ursula said. She took Johannes’ hand. “We’re building a town.”

“We’re building a town,” Johannes agreed.

18.

The farmer and doctor claimed a house several streets from Ursula and Johannes. The old priest took the house next door.

They met every evening to discuss what work was to be done the next day. The discussions were always pleasant and no one bickered over unwanted assignments.

Johannes and the newcomers rebuilt the boat so it actually resembled a boat. The doctor and the farmer began taking regular trips to the mainland.

Ursula sketched out a wooden structure enterable only by a locked gate. She called Madeleine down when no one was near and said, “Darling, I’d like you and your friends to build this around the Vex lake near the well. Make only one key for the lock and give it to me when you’re finished, please.”

Madeleine span blue in the affirmative and zipped off to begin felling trees.

19.

The doctor and the farmer returned from the mainland with a family of roof thatchers who had escaped their village as it was being razed by Devas.

Next from the mainland arrived a party of labourers and theologians with an almost identical story.

In both cases the survivors were quiet and grateful of safe quarters.

And still more refugees came.

A wineman set up a vineyard. A teacher set up a school. A farrier built a stable and set off to locate horses.

Soon the island was at a population of fifty. An economy began to develop; chefs, doctors, accountants.

Ursula designed a watering system spanning half of the island, and all folk joined in with the building effort.

Ursula and Johannes hired a gardener for their house. One afternoon the gardener sought them out to present a sign he’d found buried among the weeds. “Tereshkovi,” Ursula translated.

“What does that mean?” Johannes said.

“It was the family name of whoever lived in the house. I don’t have a family name. Do you?”

Johannes shook his head.

And so they became the Tereshkovs.

20.

Johannes was cutting wood in the forest when he heard Ursula's moan from perhaps a half-mile away. He dropped his axe and went sprinting for the Tereshkovi house. He found Ursula upstairs with the young doctor tending to her. There was some kind of clear liquid on the floor.

Johannes called out the window for more help. The doctor's husband came with fresh sheets and they placed Ursula in a fortress of pillows. Soon the bed was covered in the many colours of the birthing process.

The doctor issued a number of instructions to Ursula regarding how to breathe. When the doctor announced the head was out Johannes felt a great pain in his hand. Ursula's fingers had transformed into bear claws and from her hand sprouted mounds of brown fur. Johannes whispered into her ear, "My love, you're turning a little."

Ursula screamed and her claws became fingers once more.

Finally, she gave a last yell and the doctor made a favourable noise. The umbilical cord was severed. The doctor examined the baby and paused.

"What is it?" Ursula said.

The doctor said nothing and offered a congratulatory smile. She presented the baby to Ursula.

The baby resembled any other little girl, save for the irises of her eyes. They were impossibly green and hexagonal.

21.

Ursula did not leave the bedroom for many days, claiming to be recovering. She turned the bed into a nest of drapes and cushions, which she only left to use the toilet. Johannes slept in the study on a mattress on the floor.

Soon the baby's eyes sported not only hard Devan edges, but intelligence also. They watched Ursula's face and studied her eyes and mouth. They watched the sun's passage through the sky. They watched themselves very closely in the dresser mirror.

Johannes came again and again with soup and Ursula refused each time. He reached out for her and she moved away. He said, "We should name the

baby.”

Ursula murmured, “We made her in the moksha,” and nothing after that.

22.

A week passed in this fashion.

Late one evening Johannes checked on Ursula. She was not in bed, nor was the baby. He searched the house and the garden and the streets. He found her at last on the beach. She was preparing a boat with the baby tied to her front. He shouted to her and she ignored him. She climbed inside the boat and went to push off with an oar. Johannes grabbed the boat. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Let go,” she growled. He tried to pull the boat back up the beach. “Let go damn it.”

The baby began to cry. Johannes yelled, “What is this all about? Were you just going to leave in the night?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“Let go,” Ursula screamed, and her scream became a bear’s roar.

They both froze. Then, face in her hands, Ursula began to wail.

Johannes wrapped his arms around her. “What is it?” he whispered.

“They know. Everybody knows. It’s bad enough they know about me, but her too?”

“Her eyes are an unusual shape. So what?”

“They’ll never trust her.”

The baby scrutinised Johannes through teary, hexagonal eyes. *We made her in the moksha*, Johannes thought. “But this is our home,” he whispered.

Ursula shook her head.

They stayed like that a long time with Ursula crying quietly and the baby crying loudly and Johannes holding the two of them.

The distant crunch of pebbles. Johannes turned about to find a number of folk gathered on the beach and watching in silence. The old priest

approached the Tereshkovs with a little girl. The little girl was holding a ragged cotton ocelot. She offered the ocelot to Ursula.

“For the baby. . .” the priest said.

Ursula did not take the ocelot. Instead Johannes took it and gave it to her and she didn’t refuse.

“This is our home,” Johannes whispered again. “And the baby's too.”

Johannes put out his hand. The priest did also.

Ursula took their hands and stepped out of the boat.

Walking back up the beach then many folk touched the baby for good luck and kissed Ursula on the cheek.

Tables were set up in the streets, and beer and wine flowed amply—the town now an impromptu celebration for the arrival of this new human.

Later, with Ursula and Johannes lying in bed, Ursula said, “What was your village called again?”

“Hisarya.”

“That seems a fine name for the baby.”

Johannes kissed her on the nose.

23.

The native revolution began to spread faster, curving westwards to the water villages and marsh villages. Refugees were coming from fifty or more miles away; perhaps a hundred new folk defecting every fortnight.

The crystal towers of the town glowed green as ever, crowds busying about, spyles zipping overhead fetching food, bringing water, building new structures.

Ursula and Johannes did not make love so often now, spending most of their energy working and tending to Leo and Hisarya. Still, they shared a house, shared a life.

Every night before bed Ursula would scan the horizon, mistaking distant trees for monsters; mistaking distant clouds for deer.

24.

By the time the population swelled to almost two thousand, many caverns and cellars had been discovered beneath the town. One contained a plaque in the ancient language of the town's founders. Someone called a spyle down to the cavern and it translated that the plaque commemorated the founding of the town several thousand years ago as *Bodhi.*

So the town found its name again.

Many tablets were discovered in the caverns also, confirming without a doubt that this was indeed once the seat of the Myriad of Man, Serdika, then subsequently the capital of Lord Anaximander's holy empire.

Ursula took it upon herself to explain the significance of this to the townfolk. Reactions were mixed—few of them had even heard of Anaximander.

The weeks continued to pass in a blur of hope and industry. The native population settled outwards from the centre, and soon the suburbs smelled of coffee in the mornings and cooking in the evenings.

The soil on the outskirts was turned and corn and wheat grew bountifully.

A system of currency—bodhinis—was agreed upon and circular coins with holes in the centre were distributed. A cooperative bank was formed.

Many suggested that a council of elders should be assembled, but Ursula and Johannes resisted this adamantly. Ursula explained the concept of referendums.

"Who will organise the referendums and make sure they are fair?" many asked.

"We'll appoint someone to check that," Ursula said.

"And who will check the checkers?"

The Tereshkovs gave in finally and convened the first session of the Bodhi Council, making careful that no one had official titles.

It was on the first day of the second summer of Bodhi that Madeleine came to Ursula and informed her that Devas had been sighted to the south: eagles—the traditional scouting avatars.

Ursula was prepared for such a thing and gave an impromptu speech to several hundred in the town square.

She explained that the planet they stood on was one of thousands in the gods' empire, and while it had been a very important world long ago, now it was considered little more than a glorified farm. Nevertheless, she added, only a few hundred Devas occupy this world currently, and they are not invincible—especially if natives band together. Moksha is the source of the gods' magic. Without it, they are no more powerful than natives.

The crowd whooped and cheered at the call to action.

There were at least seven farming villages in the near vicinity of Bodhi; all of them still under Mriga's yoke. Ursula politely asked if the spyles might consider undertaking a sabotage mission, destroying the moksha plantation nearest, the village of Samokov. The spyles agreed, but explained they would not harm a native or a Deva under any conditions.

Ursula proposed a motion on the Bodhi Council that a small militia be assembled. The motion was passed unanimously. Twenty-five native volunteers were selected for the militia. They wore red tunics and decided amongst themselves to shave their heads.

Ursula assigned each volunteer a spyle and suggested that they get to know each other. The humans were taught to understand the spyle language of spins and colours and most took to it well.

Where do you come from? the natives asked their spyles.

Where does anything come from? the spyles replied.

The volunteer soldiers enjoyed a degree of celebrity even Ursula and Johannes had not attained. Townfolk liked to watch the militia training in the fields—an old and weathered military man instructing from a podium. A militia soldier would appear from the highgrass, bark a command, and their spyle would transform itself into a fug of raging dust and vaporise a tree or crop patch.

So the first phalanx of the Bodhi Army was born.

25.

The phalanx set off for Samokov, spyles at their side. Leading the phalanx was Commander Pechev, not yet even twenty, making up with ambition what he lacked in experience.

They purified stream water before drinking it. Ursula had taught them this. They walked barefoot to remain silent. Johannes had taught them this.

As children put on paper crowns and pretend at being monarchy, so the phalanx believed themselves true soldiers in their tunics, with their knives and spherical friends.

They arrived at Samokov by night. The moksha grew in the valley, just under five acres. They paused on a hill and Commander Pechev surveyed the plantation.

“Two guards at the western and eastern entrances,” he reported. To his spyle: “Arthur, if you would.”

Arthur darted across the night, keeping low. A moment later the first guard’s sword transmuted into dust. Then the second’s.

The phalanx tore down the hill, breath heavy, knives clanking against their armour, and when they reached the moksha fields they put on their breather masks and poured kindlewater everywhere. Pechev lit a match. The fire caught and the moksha went up in purple fury.

The phalanx walked away confident, no one hurrying, and they listened with great pride to the alarm gong sounding again and again from Samokov as the villagefolk tried desperately to staunch the fire and could not. The smoke got in the villagefolk’s eyes and noses and they fell to the ground with huge smiles on their faces.

Later, many rose from the dirt, free of the binds of contramoksha. They found Arthur the spyle waiting.

He informed them that a town called Bodhi lay to the north where the liberated lived, and all were welcome to join.

III

If I asked you in the midst of a tragedy, “Shall I end your suffering and make all well again?” you would answer, “Please do, I beg it.”

If instead I asked you after the tragedy, “Are you glad you lived through it? Did you grow wiser from the experience?” you would answer, “Yes! Thank you for not stopping the thing prematurely.”

Humans are not to be trusted.

- Excerpts from **The Rambling Sutras of Lord Lepus**

1.

Ten summers came and went. The population of the town rose to five thousand.

Alongside the markets and hospitals now were the specialised trade unions and study centres—the Farming Guild, the Engineering Guild, the Astronomy Guild, and the ornate offices and chambers of the Bodhi Council.

Many houses stood proud on the hill overlooking the town major. Inside one house lived Johannes—now with a great beard, and Ursula—now with her hair plaited to the floor. Also, of course, were their two children.

Hisarya was pale as her mother, tall for her age, and still retaining green and hexagonal irises.

Leo was shorter and dark-haired, with shy and thoughtful eyes.

Leo and Hisarya played together with the other town children in the glass towers. During their play they often unearthed skeletons and jewellery and ancient technology once belonging to the original Bodhi inhabitants. Johannes agreed to pay the town children in bananas if they brought him their finds.

It was the children who found the old star maps buried in the ruins, and it was the children who discovered the crystal batteries that brought the old mechanisms back to life.

The town burgeoned with new, ancient technology.

There was knowledge and wine and grain.

The weather was clement and the trees always grew fine fruit.

2.

Every day natives would come to the gates of Bodhi seeking asylum.

One afternoon a group of northerners were granted entrance and among them was Ayakashi, the legendary Deva assassin, disguised in native-form.

Once inside the central market, he took up Deva-form, a single eye on a stalk riding above a slithering mass of tentacles. The tentacles were filled with gleaming teeth and Ayakashi ate off the heads and limbs of many marketgoers.

The market emptied. Bodhi was silent save for the clanging of the crisis bells.

Ursula stepped out before Ayakashi in native-form, bearing only an asanawa cord. Ayakashi's eyestalk descended and looked her over. He spoke in Staritae, the language of the original Devas. "Clever bear," he said. "Why, you're stupid meat again."

"You've come to this world at Mriga's request?" Ursula asked.

"I go where I please."

"They say you ate people."

"I eat what I please."

"Go back to the temple and tell Mriga this town is protected."

Ayakashi said, "If you are many, wage war. If you are few, cast magic." He ate a lamppost and chewed it thoughtfully. "You know, when someone asks after you these days, we tell them you got bored of laying with Devas and started screwing cattle."

"Turn around and leave please."

"It is not too late to return to Gearheart. Lord Mriga promises you safe passage back for only the merest of favours."

"Leave. Now."

"I shan't speak with you in the primitive tongue, it offends me." Ayakashi withdrew his head into Vex and waited.

Ursula hesitated as a reformed alcoholic might when offered a sip of wine. Then she took several moksha petals from her robe and ate them.

The rush was immediate, her highmind suddenly dancing after years dormant. She pushed her head into Vex.

Spangled, shimmering light; dappled blue vortices, fractals curling about on one another as though making love.

Ayakashi said, *Yes, you remember, the thrill of it, you remember.*

Ursula replied, *I do not miss fourspace.* **Honestly. See the truth of it in my eyes.** *You come here alone, why? You aren't afraid?*

Ayakashi said, **Laugh. Jeer.** *I could end you with a thought.*

Ursula said, *You daren't kill me when Mriga suspects I know the recipe for jhanamoksha. He still hasn't perfected it, I suspect, and that is why you are here after all.*

Ayakashi said, *And do you know the recipe?*

Ursula said, *Perhaps. Perhaps not. But by now he has discovered the aegis barrier about this town and knows he can't acquire the secret by force, so only sends his disguised henchmen.*

Ayakashi said, **Indifference. I am indifferent to all. Witness how little I care.** *A gambit, clever bear. I think you do not know the secret of jhanamoksha at all.*

Ursula said, *Turn around and leave please.*

She pulled her head from Vex. Ayakashi returned to threespace. He bowed to Ursula. Ursula did not return the bow.

Ayakashi grabbed for her with a tentacle. He lifted the tentacle to find she had vanished. She ran out of the air and appeared atop his single, gigantic eye. She knotted her asanawa cord, binding his eyestalk to his body. She vanished again, pulling the cord through Vex, binding his tentacles. She entered Vex once more to tie a higher-dimensional knot across his eyeball.

When she was finished she bid Ayakashi goodbye and returned up the boulevard.

Ayakashi writhed and struggled, laughing all the while. After a time he began to call out for Ursula. She did not come.

Soon the boulevard filled with onlookers. When they saw Ayakashi could not escape they drew closer to examine him.

By evening Ayakashi had entered moksha withdrawal and wailed terribly. He fell back into threespace, into Samsara, regressed to native-form; a thin man of ragged hair and watery eyes.

The crowd set on him. He cried out again and again for Ursula, for mercy.

By the next morning only tissue and blood remained on the boulevard.

3.

At the centre of Bodhi was the schoolhouse. The other children there treated Leo and Hisarya fine, but it was no secret their parents were the founders of the town.

One morning Commander Pechev was invited to the schoolhouse to teach a lesson on self-defence.

“What does a Deva look like?” he asked the children.

Many of the children adopted fierce poses and gnashed their teeth.

Pechev pointed out the window to the horizon. “Just over there are hordes of Devas who, given half a chance, will tear our heads off.” He mimed tearing his own head off and the children gasped. “We must learn how to protect ourselves. Who would like to play the Deva today?”

Several children put their hands up. Hisarya did not put her hand up, but Pechev beckoned her to the front of the class anyway. Reluctantly she complied.

He said, “And what animal would you be, as an evil, child-eating Deva?”

Hisarya murmured, “An ocelot.”

“What’s that?”

Hisarya still carried the toy ocelot gifted to her on the shore all those years ago, and sheepishly she presented it to Pechev now.

Pechev said, “Do you keep a rattle and dummy too?”

The class burst out cackling.

Hisarya looked to Leo with pleading eyes. Leo stared back helpless.

“Then let’s imagine you an *ocelot*,” Pechev said. “Well, I suppose you’d have large teeth like this one, and whiskers too. Not to mention strange, jagged, Devan eyes. But pardon me, you have those already.”

The class bellowed laughing again.

Pechev held the toy ocelot before the class. “Well now, if you ever encounter a Deva, even one as small and pathetic as this, what should you do?”

“Run,” said a little boy.

Pechev shook his head.

“Tell Mama,” said a little girl.

Pechev shook his head again. He drew his dagger. He said, “You summon every ounce of strength within you. You remember what the Devas did to our villages and—” He cut the head off the ocelot, polystyrene beans falling everywhere.

The children cheered.

He handed the ocelot’s head back to Hisarya.

4.

Ursula heard the children come in and watched Hisarya race up to her bedroom. She followed her up a few minutes later. Hisarya was staring into the mirror, into her own eyes.

Ursula said, “Leo told me what happened.”

She tried to hug the girl, but Hisarya wriggled out of her mother’s arms and resumed staring at her eyes in the mirror. Hisarya said, “They’re the wrong shape.”

“There’s no wrong shape for eyes. My eyes used to be that shape.”

“Why aren’t they now?”

Where to even start with that? Ursula thought. She said, “You’re special. No one else has eyes like that in the town.”

“I don’t want them.”

Ursula tried to hug her again and this time Hisarya allowed it, breaking down in little sobs.

I’ll have Pechev kicked out of his phalanx, Ursula thought. *I’ll have him strung up and paraded through the town and dumped outside the aegis barrier and left for dead.*

She caught her own face in the mirror.

Tired. Ageing. Human.

No, she thought. *He’s too popular with the soldiers; they’d mutiny. I can’t do a damn thing to him.*

I’m no better than Theodora.

5.

Ursula withdrew the children from the schoolhouse and opted to educate them herself. She read them both the story of Anaximander, then let the children determine their own learning directions. Leo asked about the stars, and Ursula agreed to teach him theoretics.

Hisarya asked about devamagic. “Well, I can’t teach you that,” Ursula said.

“Why not?”

“What about the history of the Devas instead?”

Hisarya agreed begrudgingly.

Ursula taught Leo in the mornings. The boy took quickly to mathematics and theoretics. If a problem was particularly complicated, Ursula asked that Madeleine represent it and the spyle would burst into a flurry of helpful dust.

Hisarya listened from her bedroom upstairs, the language alien to her. *Coefficient. Tessellation. Quadratic.*

After lunch Ursula would take Hisarya into the forest and recount what she knew of Devan history, attempting to fit Hisarya into the story.

She explained that Mama and Hisarya weren’t the same as Leo and Papa. Mama was from a different place and Hisarya had inherited some of that differentness.

“What about devamagic?” Hisarya asked over and over.

Yes, what about it? Ursula thought, her stomach knotted. She parried the question and told Hisarya instead of the awakening of the great Anaximander, first of the Devas, of his ascendance to the throne; of how he had transformed the Myriad of Man into a great scientific and religious empire—of how, when society was perfect and nothing hurt, he ascended finally to that transcendent realm above and beside all things: Nibbana.

He left three custodians behind to preside over his holy empire.

His chief mathematician took the form of a rabbit and was known then as Lepus.

His chief philosopher took the form of a deer and was known then as Mriga.

His chief scientist took the form of a bear and was known then as Ursula.

6.

One morning Ursula tried the children on a little biology. When she got to explaining veins and arteries, she fetched her microscope. “Who will let me take a little of their blood?”

As expected, Hisarya immediately volunteered. Ursula pricked Hisarya’s finger and the children took turns peering into the microscope and observing little red blood cells swimming about.

Hisarya said, “Does everyone’s blood look like this?”

“It does,” Ursula said.

“Is mine special?”

“You’re special, darling. So, yes.”

In the afternoon Ursula brought Leo and Hisarya to the council chambers where Johannes worked. She asked that Madeleine give the children a tour of the blueprint offices, and treat them to cake after.

Alone with Johannes, Ursula brought the microscope and Hisarya’s blood vial from her satchel and set the microscope lens to Vex.

Looking in, Johannes said, “What are the blue flecks?”

“What do you think?”

“Moksha. . .”

Ursula nodded. “I think she makes it internally, like a vitamin.”

“Is that normal?”

“No.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Not for her.”

The children made the most of their sugar high on the walk home, chasing Madeleine down the street, cat-and-mouse fashion.

Turning the garden gate, the Tereshkovs stopped dead. Someone had graffitied the house with charcoal.

It clearly depicted Hisarya with the body of an ocelot, her head severed by a dagger.

7.

Beyond the glass towers, beyond the suburbs, upon the hill, was the town forest. Hisarya had guided Leo into the forest refusing to reveal their destination.

She led him by the hand over the many felled trees, through the ivy and bogs, and finally to a gated wooden structure. She took a key from her robe and unlocked the gate.

“Where did you get that?” Leo said.

“Mama’s night table.” Hisarya marched inside, Leo padding tentatively behind. Before them lay a small lake, perhaps five children wide.

Leo said, “What is it?”

Hisarya approached the water. “Mama told us never to come in here, so it must be important.”

“It looks dangerous.”

“We have one little peek and go right back home.”

“Right back home?” Leo said.

“Right back home.”

They knelt at the water. It smelled a little like jasmine and its surface reflected more colours than had apparently entered.

“What’s in there?” Leo said.

“I don’t know,” Hisarya said. “Put your hand in.”

“Me? You put *your* hand in.”

Hisarya rolled up her sleeves. She tested the water with a finger. It felt very cold.

“All right, let’s go home now,” Leo said.

She ignored him, fascinated.

“*Hisarya*.”

She put her head under the strange water. When she drew her head back out she was perfectly dry and she shrieked in delight.

“What is it?” Leo whispered. “What’s in there? Let’s go home. I’m going home.”

Hisarya put her head in again. She toppled suddenly, scrabbling for purchase, and disappeared into the water.

Leo whimpered, cried for help. He cried out again. No help came. The water was still and there was no sign of Hisarya.

Panicking, he took off his outer robe and jumped into the lake after her.

Suddenly: a mad circus of screaming echoes, staccato pulses of almost-music roaring past his ears, smears of light that bent around on themselves to smear again; twisting, braided spheres; form within form within form.

He spotted Hisarya just feet away, yet somehow miles distant. She was smiling to him, wearing the contented expression one displays after a good book or large meal. She looked happier than he’d ever seen her.

He shouted her name and the noise didn’t fly out of his mouth, but only curled back around his head.

He tried to swim over, but each kick of his legs only took him backwards or sideways, as though geometry were drunk.

He thought suddenly of Anaximander, lost in the forest. He looked to his hands as Anaximander had done, brought them to his face. They had been so familiar only moments ago. Now they were terribly complicated, impossible miracles.

He looked deeper still and saw a billion, billion organic machines all working in unison to produce a degree of order that he only *called* hands.

And beneath those machines were molecules, and beneath those molecules were atoms, and beneath those, the elementary particles, and beneath those, the apeiron loops—down and down and down into *what?*

What was at the bottom of anything, any phenomenon, any presentation? *Symmetry, solidity, heat,* and *light* were but after-utterances of some great conversation played out across the heavens, played out in every quiet corner of the universe’s being. And surely Leo himself was a part of that game too, he realised.

He was mud. He was a mud thing; not apart from the world but of it, a tiny footnote in the great book of existence. He longed desperately to open

that book and scour it from start to finish, and come away with the purpose of creation.

His will diminished to nothing. His ambition diminished to nothing. Almost everything in the universe was not him, and yet nonetheless, he was universe.

Again, he called to Hisarya. She did not seem to hear him.

Her sun-scorched blonde plaits floated across her vision and she saw them not as hair now, but swaddled declarations of the sacred Is.

The world was not beyond her, she realised. She was not some receiver taking in senses and information. The world was made *in* her head, *in* her mind.

How could there be sunsets without eyes to perceive them?

Ice cream tasted of nothing until it made contact with the tongue.

She was no longer helpless, no longer a freak, but a force of nature, the great Observer—the central point of the central mandala.

There was no majesty to creation, only the majesty of her *witnessing* creation. All of matter and life had conspired across formless space, across depthless time, to make *Hisarya.*

Her will became infinite. Her ambition became infinite. Almost everything in creation could become her one day if she wished it. The universe was the very opposite of ugly, and if she subsumed the universe in its entirety, she would never be ugly again.

Leo and Hisarya's eyes grew so wide their brows hurt. They saw deeper yet, through the million veils of reality, under every lie and delusion, both of them harbouring a growing conviction that in a moment some final thing would appear from behind the curtain—the cause of all causes, the map of all that ever was and would be—the great explanation of the world for Leo, the great explanation of how to become the world for Hisarya.

There was no air they could breathe here, but the children didn't care. Ecstasy was near.

At last it came into view, drawing close—the sacred meta-yes Mama had told them of; the foundational meaning of things, the promise that there was but one underlying phenomenon beneath the phenomena, a garden beyond true and false, finally, actually, *beautifully—*

Two spyle tendrils dived into the strange geometric world and wrapped about the children, pulled them back into Samsara, into threespace.

Set back on the lake's bank the children gasped for air, their eyes burning.

Madeleine returned to sphere-form. She checked the children over hurriedly. *Are you all right? Speak to me please, are you all right?*

When they caught their breath, the children only lay back in the dirt, exhausted, unable to talk.

They stared up at the familiar, tangible world of three dimensions. It had majesty, but a muted kind. It had form, but no clear function.

Now the leaves and mud and birds and daylight appeared to Leo as only a blur of senseless colour, as though stealing a glimpse of some divine work of art through a dirty window on a peasant's street.

Now the caverns and promontories of Hisarya's mind only felt to her bounded and featureless, as though watching a cloud through a telescope.

The children began to scream.

8.

Hisarya woke after two days in bed. Ursula was sitting at her bedside. She stroked Hisarya's hair and made her drink a glass of water. She said, "You must tell me exactly what happened."

Hisarya murmured, "I'm sorry I took the key. I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"It's all right, just tell me what you saw in there."

Hisarya recounted the misadventure in little gasps; the strange light and strange noises, of how she had seen the infinite palace within herself, of how she had belonged there.

She cried that she wanted to go back.

"Darling, that was Vex. It's not made for us. You can't go back inside."

Though she saw by Hisarya's eyes that some vital part of the child still remained deep beneath the water.

9.

Leo listened to the vague murmur of Ursula and Hisarya talking, unable to make out the content. He imagined the sound waves as pulsing lines forcing themselves through the wall, through the air, into his ears. He imagined the sound waves vibrating the little hairs in his ears, turning into electrical signals, racing into his brain.

Ursula let herself into his room. “Are you all right?” she said softly.

He nodded. “Is Hisarya okay?”

“She will be.”

She knelt at his bedside. Leo tried to hide himself in the bedclothes.

“Everything hurts,” he whispered.

“I know, my love.”

“I want to see it again. I want to go there again.”

Firmly, so he would remember for years to come Ursula said, “You can’t. You can’t ever see things like that again. You’re not made for it. You’ll forget how it felt soon, I promise.”

“Where did we go?”

“Do you really want to know?”

A whisper again: “Yes.”

“Do you remember our spacetime diagrams?” He nodded. “Somewhere beyond that.”

“How?”

“Another day, darling. Just get your strength back now.”

Ursula joined Johannes in bed. They only laid in silence with their eyes open.

10.

Political life grew more complex and fermented. Commander Pechev was demanding the Bodhi Army be afforded representation on the Bodhi Council. Johannes remembered a time not so long ago when there hadn’t even been a Bodhi Army.

Meanwhile the Engineering Guild was on strike demanding more pay, right in the middle of extending the plumbing network of Bodhi. Much of the suburbs would be waterless until they resumed work. Ursula remembered a time not so long ago when the Bodhi folk hadn't even known what an engineer was.

At night Johannes sat on the floor of his office at the council building and drank whisky until the worries quieted.

There are always crises, Johannes thought. *Ours will be over eventually.*

Yes, the worries said in him, *but the end of one crisis is only the beginning of the next.*

11.

Leo began work on building a small buggy in the garden. He acquired the wheels from a cart and the frame from discarded metal. Ursula watched his progress from the house and did not interfere, already busy with Hisarya's intensifying questions regarding devamagic.

On the fifth day Ursula looked out of the kitchen window to see the buggy driving around by itself. She ran out into the garden. "Whoa," she said.

Leo opened the buggy up to reveal a rudimentary steam engine inside powered by pellets of coal.

"Now how in Anaximander's name did you learn to build that?" Ursula asked.

"Made it up," he said gingerly.

"My small human, bright though you may be, am I to believe you just rediscovered the steam age in a week?"

He folded easily. He took her upstairs and showed her several crystal tablets he'd found in one of the abandoned towers. The language was ancient and indecipherable, but the diagrams spoke for themselves. One tablet clearly displayed a steam engine. Another, an early combustion engine. Another, a Casimir battery.

"Why didn't you tell me about these when you found them?" Ursula said.

Leo muttered, “You only ever teach me half of things.”

Ursula asked Madeleine to let the Engineering Guild know she wouldn’t be in until later and said to Leo, “I’m all yours. Ask me anything and I’ll tell you.”

Leo presented another tablet. It displayed a three-axis grid, though with a fourth axis shooting off behind it.

“Ah. . .” Ursula murmured. “That’s a little trickier.”

“You said anything,” Leo reminded her.

“You’re asking about this because of the day you went into the lake?”

He nodded.

She fetched the little metal Vex spider from her bedside drawer and returned. She said in her teacher’s voice, “What are the three degrees of freedom?”

“Up down, left right, back forward,” Leo said.

Ursula set the spider loose on the floor. It clambered towards Leo. Leo reached out and the spider walked into the air, then reappeared on his bed. Leo swallowed.

“There are two more directions I haven’t told you about: vex and weg,” Ursula said. “They’re at right angles to the world we know, an extra spatial dimension.” *Will I regret this one day?* She wondered.

Leo reached for the trainer again. It vanished and appeared on the bookshelf. “Vex and weg. . .” Leo said.

Ursula sketched out the manifold equations for threespace on Leo’s little blackboard. She added the four-dimensional equation for Vex. “You see?” she said, thinking he wouldn’t.

He took the chalk and tried substituting in a time equation, modified it for the new dimension. Ursula added an extra tensor, corrected his working, and the equation was fine.

She explained that in Vex, if a Deva were adept enough, objects in threespace could be altered from above as though by a miracle—a tree stripped suddenly of bark, a man stripped suddenly of shoes, a bear changed into a woman, then back into a bear.

She explained that in Vex, distance was not quite so absolute. A Deva could walk from one side of the world to the other in minutes.

She explained that she had been a scientist once and, while Leo could do whatever he liked, she would be ever so proud if he chose the same path.

“How does it work?” Hisarya said, watching the spider from the doorway. “Is it devamagic?”

“It’s not magic, darling,” Ursula said.

Leo grabbed, and the spider vanished again, back into some adjacent, perfectly inaccessible world.

12.

Several days later the children were working on their homework in the garden. Hisarya waited for Madeleine to go inside and said quietly, “That spider *was* devamagic, same as the lake.”

Leo shook his head. “It wasn’t magic.”

“Prove it.”

“You have to know theoretics,” he said with too much pride. Hisarya’s face immediately betrayed shame.

Guilty, Leo said, “Why don’t we write each other a story? I’ll make mine about geometry and you make yours about Deva history. That way we’ll teach each other.”

“There already is a story about Deva history, The Gospel of Anaximander, and you know it,” Hisarya said flatly.

“I’ll write *you* a story then, all about Mama’s theoretics.” He took up a pencil and parchment. “What should it be about?”

“An ocelot.”

Leo shook his head.

“An ugly, stupid ocelot with no friends.”

“Hisarya.”

“You said you’d write me a story.”

And so, uncertainly, he began.

13.

Founders’ Day.

While Bodhi busied about in preparation for celebrating the Tereshkovi family, Johannes himself was in the main council chamber. The chamber was empty save for a minutetaker, several folk from the Engineering Guild, and Commander Pechev.

Johannes’ eyes were heavy with lack of sleep. He’d stayed up until sunrise with a whisky bottle, waiting for a solution to the meeting he sat in now. No solution had come.

“Lord Judge,” Johannes said. “We cannot possibly vote on the matter today. Almost none of the council are present.”

“Lord Judge,” Command Pechev said in mock-sincerity. “Patriarch Johannes himself enshrined into law not a decade ago that on national holidays council members needn’t attend council proceedings. There is no law stating that those who *do* attend cannot vote on council matters.”

Johannes thought, *Fuck you to the eight cold hells.*

The votes were cast, a clear majority in Commander Pechev’s favour. The Bodhi Army was granted its seat on the Bodhi Council.

“How did it all go?” Ursula asked upon Johannes’ return home.

“Everything’s fine.”

Evening came and, in accordance with the Founders’ Day rituals, Ursula and Johannes were draped with sashes of painted vines and invited to sit at the head of a long table in the town square. Soon the square was full of folk and music played from all about and the head of each family brought homemade grape brandy for Ursula and Johannes to try.

“That’s delicious,” they said after the first few sips. “Yes. Mm. Ahm,” they said after the fifteenth or so.

“You know,” Johannes murmured to Ursula. “The children are back at home with Madeleine, and I’ve got some good whisky in my bag. We could go find a field and relive old times.”

She kissed his neck. “Civic duties, my love.”

The crowd surrounded them, a great blanket of kin. Above, the spyles danced and shone. For just a moment, Pechev’s ascension to the council left Johannes’ mind.

What a thing we have here, he thought, looking out at the town. *What a wonderful castle we've built together.*

A messenger pushed through the crowd and whispered into Ursula's ear that a deer had been seen stalking Bodhi's aegis barrier.

"What is it?" Johannes said.

"Everything's fine."

14.

Hisarya woke to yelling from outside. Soon it cohered into a single, drunken chorus from the garden.

Deva witch. Deva witch. Deva witch.

She peeked above the windowpane with wet eyes, saw Madeleine shoot out into the garden spinning a furious red and shepherd the drunks away.

Hisarya cried silently into her bedsheets.

She thought of her plunge into the Vex lake, the way her consciousness had opened up lotus-like. For just a moment she had seen emotion and sensation for what they were: no more than dirt one could effortlessly brush off from the lantern of pure awareness.

Another sound, this time from inside her bedroom. A few bound sheets of parchment were slipped under her door. She got up and read them in the moonlight.

Geometry for Ocelots *by Leo Tereshkov (eleven and three-quarter years old)*

There was once a lonely ocelot lost in the forest.

Where were her mama and papa?

Where was her brother?

She ran left and right and found them nowhere. She ran back and forward and found them nowhere.

She searched the whole forest and still no Mama or Papa or brother.

She returned to the centre of the forest and sat down against the largest, tallest tree.

A little voice said, “But there is one direction you still have not tried.” The voice belonged to a little blue beetle. “Up.”

“Up?” the ocelot said. “There is no such thing.”

“Only because you have never experienced it,” the little beetle said. He began to climb the tree. “Up,” he repeated. “Up, up, up…” And his voice became very faint as he vanished into the banches above.

"Up," the ocelot said to herself. "Is there such a thing? I’ve never seen it, nor tasted it, nor smelled it. But what if I’d never seen yellow either, would I deny that exists too?"

She took a deep breath. She told herself she was brave.

She climbed the tree a little and stood on a branch. She looked to the ground.

Sure enough the ground was further away now.

“Up!” she cried.

She climbed faster and faster, grabbing branches and getting her hair dirty. Soon the forest grew even smaller below until she was in the clouds.

She promised herself she’d never again ignore something just because she couldn’t imagine it.

She reached the top of the tree.

There were her mama and papa. There was her brother.

“Oh, clever ocelot,” they said and opened their arms. “Come here, come here, we’ve missed you, we’ve missed you…”

15.

Ursula and Johannes returned to their neighbourhood just before sunrise and kissed for a long while in the street.

Tiptoeing through their garden they were greeted by the image of the beheaded ocelot upon the house wall once more.

It was painted in animal blood this time, and Hisarya's features were clearly discernible.

16.

One afternoon Johannes took Leo to see the inner workings of the Bodhi Council.

Leo walked quietly at his father's side as Johannes pointed out *senator* this and *first aide* that. The official folk stopped to introduce themselves to the patriarch's son. They made many jokes that Leo would be patriarch one day and he tried to smile.

Johannes took him to the dressing chamber where the administrative robes and seals were. He waited for Leo to be impressed. Leo nodded, said nothing.

He took him to the legal library where twenty scribes sat before twenty desks enshrining new legislation. Leo nodded again.

They passed under the bell tower. Leo stopped and stared. "What's that?" he said.

"Just a clock," Johannes said, anxious to surprise the boy with ice cream in the sweets house down the street. Still Leo stared. "It's just a clock," Johannes said. Finally: "I can take you up there, but it's very boring."

Leo nodded eagerly and so up they went, climbing ladders, fording girders, until they stood in the heart of the mechanism, all brass cogs and rubber pulleys. Leo spied a pendulum at the heart of the clock, the apparatus by which time accuracy was guaranteed. Leo asked, "Did Mama design this?"

"Yes," Johannes said. "Would you like some ice cream?"

Leo watched the pendulum swinging back and forth.

He recalled those endless minutes in the Vex lake, the dance of reality all about him; the way the world hadn't just *seemed* a certain way, but presented its true face.

He closed his eyes, listening to the clicks and whirrs. He strained to hear the mechanism behind the clock itself; strained to hear, behind that even, the music of the mechanism of the world.

17.

Ursula was working in her office at the Engineering Guild when there came a knock at the door. She mumbled affirmatively.

Commander Pechev entered in full military dress, his red toga flecked with gold, his chest rattling with medals.

“Commander,” Ursula said.

“Mrs Tereshkova,” Pechev said and bowed.

“Congratulations on your appointment to the council, we’re very happy to have you.”

“Your husband especially, I’m sure.” He bowed again, keeping his eyes on her. “I was told to report to you at first notice for a security briefing as part of my appointment.”

“There’s really no hurry,” Ursula said.

“I’m a stickler for protocol.”

Well I made up the damn protocols, Ursula thought and smiled politely. She fetched the security notes from her desk. She said, “There’s isn’t much confidential material to brief you on. We have a spy embedded with the Naoki people one hundred miles west. Oh, and the chief astronomer thinks there’ll be an ancient satellite shower next week, Tuesday to be precise. If that will be all, I’m rather busy.”

Pechev said, “I should like full access to whatever information you have regarding the Devan threat.”

Ursula glanced up. Pechev’s shaven face gave the appearance of a boy playing soldier. She said, “As far as I’m aware there *isn’t* a Devan threat. We haven’t sighted a single Deva in, what, a year? They wouldn’t dare attack while the aegis barrier stands.”

Pechev leant closer. “Mrs Tereshkova, it is no secret that you were once of Devan persuasion. I wouldn’t presume to understand what that world is like, nor how Devas live, but what little I do know for sure is that they are violent and certainly haven’t forgotten about us.”

“We are quite safe in Bodhi,” Ursula said. “There shouldn’t be any way for a four-dimensional creature to penetrate the aegis barrier. Even if they present as native, the new blood tests should—”

“I firmly believe the Bodhi Army should double its phalanx numbers.”

“Commander Pechev, you longed for this position on the council and now you have achieved it, and that is fine. What you have *not* achieved is the right to dictate military policy. We are not warmongers.”

Some remnant of her Devan highmind whispered, *You are being harsh. He will remember this loss of face forever.*

“Understood,” Pechev said coolly. “One final matter I would like to raise with you then, if I may.” Ursula nodded. “The native revolution has reached a cousin of mine to the east, in Varvara. He and his family have sent a spyle requesting asylum in Bodhi.”

“Of course.” Ursula found a quill and parchment. “What is he called?”

“Dimitar Eno.”

She attempted to take regular breaths and said casually, “Eno? That’s an unusual name.”

“I believe you executed his cousin, my uncle, Chief Eno of Johannes’ old village.” His eyes were thin and did not waver.

“Pechev,” Ursula said. A pause. Pechev said nothing. “I’ll see he’s received and inducted when he arrives.”

“Too kind.”

18.

Pechev was accompanied at every council meeting by two phalanx soldiers and wore a ceremonial scimitar at all times. He preached constantly of an impending Devan attack. Johannes tried explaining that all signs pointed to Mriga’s congregation having put their resources into retaining the last native moksha farms on the world, but Pechev would not drop the matter.

Within two weeks of his appointment to the council, Pechev had managed to pass three votes on military funding and the Bodhi Army was now training five extra phalanxes.

He told stories of the sacking of his village; a Deva crocodile ripping into a windmill as though it were nothing; a wolf that spat fire and walked through the air. He turned on Johannes. “Not to mention the young witch and the mother witch who live within the grounds of our very town.”

Joints aching, brain aching, Johannes walked the long way home. He recalled those easy days only a few years ago, before money, before the jailhouse, when charity was common and no one stole.

Was it that humans couldn't live together in large numbers without degeneration, or rather that he and Ursula had simply built a society badly?

Ursula was asleep when he arrived back at the house. He undressed and wrapped himself around her and she woke to half-consciousness.

"What have we done?" he whispered.

"All we could," she whispered back. "There was another crowd outside Hisarya's window tonight, most of them soldiers."

"The same chant?"

"The same chant."

She fell back asleep and he watched her face in the half-dark a long time.

In his mind he surveyed the town and all the sacred and clever things his wife had delivered.

Knowledge. Technology. Culture.

Children.

Down the hall, Leo lay sleeping in his bedroom.

Hisarya's bedroom was empty.

19.

Through the crystal alleys, under the ancient statues, past the water machines, Hisarya watched for guards and crept on. She crossed the suburbs, entered the forest, and hiked to the little enclosure that housed the Vex lake. No key with her this time, she kicked at the door, tried to force it open. Nothing.

She sat against the door a long time, watched the shimmering green of the town through the trees.

"It's easy when you know how," murmured a voice from behind the door.

Hisarya whispered, "Who's there?"

“It’s easy when know how,” the voice said again.

“What is?”

“Walking through walls. Why, you don’t walk through them at all. You fall.”

“That’s stupid,” Hisarya said.

“Is it? What about walking? Aren’t you always falling a little bit when you walk, then catching yourself?”

“That’s different.”

“Only because you’ve never tried falling through walls.”

“Who are you?”

“Stand up and try it,” the voice said.

“I should go home.”

“Stand up. Just try it.”

Hisarya stood.

“There’s not so much difference between air and a door. Maybe the molecules in a door are a little more compacted, but that’s it.”

“What do I do?”

“You fall and you catch yourself, just like any other kind of walking.”

Hisarya concentrated, walked at the door, and mashed her nose into the metal.

The voice said, “Not quite like that. Do you remember the day you fell into the lake?”

“How do you know about that?”

“Do you remember how near everything was? Do you remember how it felt like you could’ve gone anywhere if you wanted?” Hisarya made an agreeable noise. “Fall into that place again. You’ve done it once already. You don’t need lakes. You never left the lake.”

Hisarya tried to remember that strange feeling of being outside her body, of being outside the world, where light had bent around her and she’d been at the centre of everything.

She ran at the door—*You fall and you catch yourself, you fall and you catch yourself, you fall and you catch yourself. . .*

A freezing wind. A screaming echo.

She fell to her knees, tumbled. Then, opening a cautious eye, she found herself before the Vex lake.

Waiting in a reflection on the lake's surface was a deer. Upon the deer's forehead was a blue streak of dye and its antlers were decorated in glittering chains and loops of silver and its nose was very black. It bowed to her. In an old voice it said, "Madam Hisarya."

She marvelled at the deer, raised a shaking hand to wave. "You're a Deva."

The deer said, "I am an old friend of your mother's. I am like you and your mother."

"I don't know. . ."

"Do you see my eyes? Look into my eyes. They are like yours, aren't they?" She examined the deer's eyes and saw that they were hexagonal. "We're special," the deer said. "You're especially special. You can trust me. I am a friend of your mother's." Hisarya fidgeted awkwardly. "Well, there it is. You fell through the door, so you can do a little devamagic already. Is your mother teaching you how to use it?"

Hisarya shook her head. The deer said, "I could teach you devamagic."

"Could you?"

"Oh yes. I could teach you to be very powerful."

Hisarya saw herself in a magical blue robe like the one the deer wore. She saw herself with a crown of blue fire, with chains and loops of silver about her neck, eating pears as the whole of Bodhi bowed to her. She saw them all begging for mercy. "I would like you to teach me to be very powerful," she said.

"Then so it shall be." The deer bowed.

Hisarya bowed back.

"Madam, why do you bow to me?" the deer said. "You are the Maitreya, no less."

"Mai. . ."

"Maitreya. You are the return of the Golden One who was promised to us after Lord Anaximander ascended to Nibbana. One day you will be capable of great things." He closed his eyes. Where a deer had been there was now a lion. The lion vanished just as quickly, replaced by a gigantic wasp. A deer again, he said, "There, should you like to learn to do that?"

Hisarya nodded very quickly.

“I can teach you madam, but you will have to come to my temple.”

“What is it like?” Hisarya asked with reverence and excitement.

“Oh, impossible to describe. Hasn’t your mother told you?”

“Mama never talks of it, even when I ask.”

“For shame, for *shame*. She lived there a while herself, yet won’t even tell her daughter of its beauty?”

“Never.”

“Then how lucky it is we met because I am not so boring. I will teach you how not to be less than you are.”

The regal image came to Hisarya’s mind again—the crown of blue fire, the silver chains, the many townfolk prostrating before her and begging for forgiveness.

“Do you accept me as your teacher?” the deer asked.

Hisarya thumbed the severed ocelot head in her pocket. “Yes.”

“Then I shall prepare for your education. Return here tomorrow evening and we’ll travel to my temple together. Tell no one of what you’re doing; they’ll only be jealous. Do you promise me that?”

Hisarya nodded uncertainly.

The deer began to vanish, arching his head back into nothingness until he was but a black nose.

Then that too was gone.

20.

News spread quickly that Hisarya was gone.

The farmers searched the fields and found nothing. The labourfolk searched the mills and storehouses and found nothing. Her name was called from every tower and elevation.

Ursula came running into the Tereshkovi house. She brandished Hisarya’s sandals before Johannes; found, she reported, by the Vex lake. “We have to go after her. Right now.”

“I’ll get my sword,” Johannes said.

Ursula chanced on Commander Pechev in the street. He appeared to be searching for Hisarya, though not so hastily. She informed him of Hisarya’s probable flight into Vex and asked that he assemble his phalanxes for battle.

“Aren’t you a Deva, Mrs Tereshkova?” Pechev said. “I thought your powers were absolute.”

“Commander, you will take three phalanxes east. We will storm—”

“Madam, just a year ago you passed a law that all military action had to be sanctioned in majority by the Bodhi Council.”

“That was for declarations of war. This is a different situation entirely.”

“And yet the legislation stands. . .” Pechev purred.

Ursula arched her back. “Are you refusing an order, Commander?”

Pechev raised an eyebrow and said as though to a child, “If you are ordering me to break the law, then yes.”

“If this is about Chief Eno, look—”

“Good day, Mrs Tereshkova. I will notify you if we find any clues regarding your daughter’s disappearance.”

Ursula sprinted to the Bodhi Army barracks. Many guards were sat around smoking and playing cards. She said, “All of you, get into battledress immediately please. You are being dispatched on a sortie.”

They continued smoking. One soldier said, “I’m afraid we only answer to Commander Pechev.”

Ursula raised herself to full height. “I am one of the founders of this town. I was present at the passing of every law and I designed the systems that bring you water and the defences that keep you safe. I was once a bear and tore heads from bodies and spat those heads as bullets. Battledress. Immediately.”

“I’m afraid we only answer to—”

She ran into the forest, over bogs and thistles, back to the Vex lake. She squinted into the lake, searching desperately for anything more substantial than her reflection.

She shouted Hisarya’s name over and over.

She put her hand into the lake. It was cold, thin. She tasted the lake.

Water. Nothing more than water.

She lay back and cried, her moans in perfect discord with the crisis bells of Bodhi.

IV

The true horror of existence is not the certainty of death, nor the threat of hell, but the knowledge that we will likely go our entire lives as impossibly complex machines, walking about in an impossibly complex universe, and never truly discover what it was all for.

I don't know is brave. *I'll never know* is heroic.

- Excerpts from **The Rambling Sutras of Venerable Lord Lepus**

1.

So it was Hisarya floundered about in the Vex lake, spinning vex and weg through inconceivable geometry.

She felt herself pulled down, or some cousin of down, and she cried out, the cry circling around her head in spinning red ribbons.

She fell suddenly into a forest, seemingly back in three dimensions.

A deer appeared before her. Hisarya bowed. The deer did not return the bow. The deer said, “I am Venerable Lord Mriga. These are my lands. You will treat them with the utmost respect. Follow.”

The deer led Hisarya through the forest in silence. They came to a clearing and Mriga nodded at the ground and said, “You will sleep here. I will return in the morning. There is a stream nearby for water.”

“I’m hungry,” Hisarya said.

“And I am old.”

The deer left with graceful clops.

Hisarya collected leaves together into a pile. She laid on the pile and stared up through the tree canopy.

She listened to the bustling of evening insects. She listened to her rumbling stomach.

Soon everything was lonely and against her and she began to cry.

2.

When Hisarya woke, an old man was sitting cross-legged in the dirt opposite. He was bald with grey bushy eyebrows, heavy hanging eyelids, and a face of no emotion. He wore only a blue Devan robe and no shoes.

The old man spoke with the voice of Mriga the deer and said, “There is a bucket by the stream. You will fill the bucket with water and carry the

water to that barrel over there. You will continue until the barrel is full of water.” The old man closed his eyes, apparently meditating.

Hisarya passed through the trees and located the bucket and stream. She filled the bucket with water. By the time she returned to the barrel she saw the bucket was empty. On inspection there were many holes in the bottom of the bucket.

She said, “There are holes in it.” The old man remained meditating.

Hisarya returned to the stream and filled the bucket once again, and once again the bucket was empty by the time she returned to the barrel.

“Please,” she said.

The old man did not respond.

She repeated the ritual many times and always the result was the same. When night came on she put down the bucket and sat opposite the old man. Still with his eyes closed he said, “The barrel is empty.”

“There are holes in the bucket.”

“And yet the barrel is still empty.”

She said, “When will you teach me devamagic?”

There was no reply.

On instinct she looked about for Ursula, but Ursula was nowhere to be seen. She cried until her eyes wouldn’t make tears anymore.

She returned to the stream and fetched more water, sobbing quietly. She repeated the ritual over and over through the night. When her arms were too exhausted to hold the bucket she threw it at the old man’s feet. She cried, “I won’t, I won’t, I won’t.”

The old man opened his eyes. “Why did it take you so long to refuse?”

Trembling she said, “You told me to do it.”

“Yet the ritual was pointless. Don’t ever surrender to a pointless order again, not from a Deva, not from a native. Disobedience I will tolerate. Stupidity I will not.”

He stood and walked into the trees. He called out, “You may eat any apples that have fallen, then sleep. We will continue tomorrow.”

3.

She woke the next day to the old man sitting cross-legged as before. There was no collecting water this time. Instead, he instructed her to close her eyes and watch her breath. She closed her eyes and thought about Ursula.

Mriga said, “I told you to watch your breath.”

“I’m bored. I won’t do it,” Hisarya whimpered.

Mriga said, “Good try, but it is not a pointless order this time. Rather, it’s one with a point too distant for you to grasp presently. Your mind is a bucket filled with holes and all the thoughts fall out as soon as they’re put in. If you are patient then the holes will close by themselves. We can go no further in your training until you understand that.”

She closed her eyes. She listened to her breath a while. She said, “This is still boring.”

“If you won’t watch your breath, watch your boredom. You aren’t your boredom. Watch your boredom until you realise this.”

She tried again. She squirmed about. She counted the seconds passing. She thought of Bodhi and Mama and Papa and Leo.

“Please,” she said.

Mriga remained silent.

4.

Another day passed in the same fashion. All Hisarya could feel was frustration and discomfort and she missed Ursula and Johannes horribly and just wanted to hide herself in Ursula’s arms.

Another day. Another.

Her mind chattered and screamed constantly now and she heard it in her ears it was so loud. Every muscle in her legs was aching to run from the horrible old man. She hadn’t known suffering like this was possible, with a back so sore and a mind so bored and missing her parents and even missing her brother, and whenever she opened her mouth to say these things Mriga only put up a hand and told her to return to the breathing exercise.

Fifteen days passed like this.

Anguish. Constant, unending mental anguish.

She might stand a chance of escape if she tried, she decided.

Back to what, though?

Ugliness.

Taunts and ugliness.

5.

Two months.

Nothing had changed in Hisarya, nor in the forest, nor in Mriga, apparently.

A memory of Leo came to her.

Last year the two of them had found a cache of spinach rolls in the bakingwoman's pantry. They stole several and took them back to the Tereshkovi house and ate them all in one sitting.

The memory intensified, of spinach, of pastry. Hisarya's stomach felt like it would cave in. She tried to look anywhere else in her mind but at the hunger.

And when she had turned her inner eye on almost every object inside her consciousness, when the distress had filled her up to madness, Mriga's words burst into her mind as though from a side door: *You aren't your boredom. Watch your boredom until you realise this.*

She watched her hunger. The hunger still persisted; only, she did not associate herself with it.

She turned her inner eye on other things within her mind. She watched the mental presentations of Ursula and Johannes' faces, but did not long for them so much now.

She watched the pain in her legs and only thought, *There is pain in my legs.*

She listened to her breath, and it sounded like a beautiful song.

She opened her eyes. "Oh," she whispered.

Mriga was a deer again. He bowed deeply to her.

6.

Hisarya improved very quickly at quieting her mind and after few weeks she was able to enter a relaxed mental state inside of a few minutes. When she got bored, she only watched the boredom and it went away.

Mriga explained that most people's minds were monkeys, running about, wayward. But she would be a tree, Mriga said, with firm roots and unbreakable branches.

She would be a cloud, Mriga said, watching all, affecting nothing.

He taught her the Doctrine of Vacuum and the fifteen prayers of Perfect Knowledge.

He taught her that wrath is just, and fire is sterilising.

He taught her a type of visualisation meditation in which she pictured all those who had hurt her, all those who had teased and jeered, all those who had watched the teasing and jeering and done nothing to stop it.

Then he taught her to embrace those visions with flames.

7.

One morning during their lessons there rang out a distant woman's voice. It seemed to be calling Hisarya's name.

Mriga said, "Continue your practice," and walked into Vex.

He materialised at the aegis barrier of the temple grounds. Ursula was waiting on the other side of the aegis barrier in bear-form—her fur straggled, her eyes sunken and tired.

Mriga bowed. "Venerable scholar, where is your army? I hear your settlement has amassed a formidable fighting force."

Ursula spat on the ground and uttered curses in Staritae, the old tongue. "Give her back."

"*Give*. One *gives* pets or possessions. The Maitreya is neither."

"I'll have you answer to the Golden Council for this. And if they won't do anything about it then you'll answer to me. I'll rip off your legs. I'll stuff your antlers down your throat. I'll—"

Mriga said, “Madam, I see you’re angry. Might I recommend returning when you’re of a more settled mind?”

Ursula shot weg at the aegis barrier and rebounded off, falling onto her back. She ran at the aegis again and again until her face and paws were bleeding. She yelled, “Come here and stand before me with honour.”

“My lady, you seem possessed by something wicked. I entreat you to meditate on the heart jewel and rediscover your compassion. Until then.” He bowed and walked back into the forest.

“Bastard,” Ursula screamed. “Worm. Snake. Bastard. I’ll pluck out your eyes. I’ll cut out your tongue.”

Mriga returned through Vex to Hisarya. Ursula’s screaming was still faintly audible in the distance.

“Who was it?” Hisarya asked.

“A wild native trying to breach entrance to the grounds.”

“It sounded a little like my mother.”

“One of the many tricks our clinging minds play on us. I’ve told you, your mother has abandoned you. Your whole family has abandoned you.”

Hisarya caught a tear before Mriga could notice it falling.

She listened neutrally to the distant voice for many hours. Soon it turned to a rasp. Then to desperate crying. Then silence.

8.

Six months.

Fetching water one day, Hisarya caught her reflection on the surface of the stream.

Am I the reflection or the girl? she wondered. *Neither, truly. Both also*.

She stood up to find a new thing in her, like an adding machine finally delivering some perfect numerical result: *There is no thinker*.

When she returned to the clearing Mriga was waiting there. A tray of objects lay before him: a wooden box, a pot of dye, and a blue robe.

Mriga said, “You’ve found the sacred emptiness.”

“Yes.”

“Then I formally invite you to become my student. Will you take refuge in your teacher?”

She nodded.

“Will you forgo childish things?”

She nodded.

With eyes empty and infinite, Mriga intoned, “Why is there suffering in the world?”

“No reason.”

“What is the destination of all journeys?”

“No location.”

“Who am I talking with now?”

“No person.”

He marked her head with blue dye. He gave her the blue robe and she put it on over her pyjamas.

He said, “Your old self is dead. There is no new self. From this day forward your name will be Jetsunma.” He prostrated on the ground before her. “Jetsunma, great Maitreya promised to us by the Golden One Lord Anaximander, I offer you ordination. I present you with the sacred techniques by which, if they are perfected, one may achieve ultimate mastery over the deceptive self, and ultimate mastery over the deceptive world. I’ll hide nothing from you, not the secret of levitation, nor the practice of stepping between worlds. You will wear a crown of blue flames. You will cleanse the hearts of your enemies in red flames. You will cast out the unfaithfuls within my temple and build your own temple. Your kingdom will stretch infinitely throughout Samsara and Vex. You will lead us to the esoteric realms above.”

Dressed now in this mystical new robe, and dressed now in this mystical new name, Hisarya felt a burst of pride.

She watched the pride closely.

With her mind’s gaze upon it, the pride began to melt.

Soon it was gone entirely.

V

The ‘explanation behind all explanations’ my colleagues and I are searching for is hardly much different than our ancestors’ quest to know the mind of God.

Sometimes it feels like the answer is imminently close. On those days, I drink.

Sometimes it feels like the answer is impossibly distant. On those days, I drink.

- Excerpts from **Informal Interviews with Dr Leo Tereshkov**

1.

It was exactly five years since Hisarya had fled, and the wind was cold and wild that night; the stars stark and clear.

Distantly a trumpet blare rang out beyond Bodhi. Many townfolk filed out of their houses to look to where the blare had come.

East, from the temple of Venerable Lord Mriga.

A great blue flame shot up into the night, and across the night came the sound of roars and screams—animal protestations, terrified, tortured. The fire and shrieking intensified until the air was full of it, deafening. The whole of Bodhi listened in transfixed silence.

Ursula glassed the night with a telescope. She caught sight of a small figure approaching in a sprint, blonde sun-scorched plaits flailing about her face.

Closer then, clearly Hisarya, the girl approached the aegis barrier in her Bodhi pyjamas. She sported adolescent features now, though still with Ursula's freckles and Johannes' athleticism, and her face was streaked with tears and ash.

She fell before the gate of the aegis barrier. She said, panicked, "There has been a revolution at the temple. The Devas have turned on each other. I managed to escape in the confusion. Please let me inside."

Ursula and Johannes forced their way through the guarding phalanxes to the aegis. "My darling. . ." Ursula said. "Were you followed?"

"Please just let me inside—I think they're coming."

The watchman said, "What if it's a trick, Ayakashi again?"

Ursula asked, "What is it you keep on your desk, in our house?"

Hurriedly Hisarya said, "Quills. And books. And the teapot with the purple spots. And the yellow spice jar. And—"

"Raise the gate," Commander Pechev cried.

"Just a moment," Ursula said. Directly to Hisarya: "Darling, let us test your blood first, just to be sure."

"For what?" Johannes said.

Ursula whispered. “A revolution at the temple? It makes no sense. I’ve still got her blood profile on file. Let’s compare it to her blood now. If it's identical, we'll know this isn't a trick.”

Johannes nodded. “Send for the blood doctor.”

“Mama. . .” Hisarya said, tears in her eyes.

“Raise the gate,” Pechev cried again. “The Tereshkova daughter has returned.”

Ursula snapped at Pechev, “There’s too much at stake here to be stupid. Stand the hell down. Two more minutes won’t put her in danger. Please, let’s just wait until the blood results.”

Pechev sneered, “What failure of parenting is this, Mrs Tereshkova? You alienate your daughter, then stage a humiliation upon her return.”

“Hell damn you, Pechev, I’m ordering that—”

Measuredly, chilled as wind, Pechev said, “Raise the gate.”

The townfolk gazed from Ursula to Pechev, all silent but for the racket of Devan screams from the temple.

“Please. . .” Hisarya whimpered beyond the shimmer of the aegis barrier. “I only want to come home.”

Pechev pushed the watchman aside and raised the gate himself.

Hisarya rushed through and stood before her parents. Johannes yelled in joy. Ursula opened her arms. “Oh darling, oh darling, come here. . .”

The distant fire evaporated. The distant shrieking fell silent.

Hisarya wiped her tears. She pushed the plaits off her face.

Her form shimmered. Her pyjamas became sheets of raging blue fire and upon her head rose a crown of blue flames. A gleaming blue tilak streaked down her forehead. Whiskers grew from her face and yellow and black fur sprouted across her body. She descended onto four legs and towered above the townfolk, an ocelot with burning green eyes.

“Back,” Ursula screamed. “All of you, get back.”

The phalanxes raised their spears. “Stand down,” Pechev yelled. “Today we receive the Maitreya.”

The townfolk burst into panic, running for their houses.

Hisarya walked leisurely in and out of Vex, a spectre trailed by blue and red fire.

She took the spears from the soldiers who resisted her, then took their heads also.

She wrapped her asanawa cord about the Bodhi houses, and the houses exploded into rubble.

She bound the fleeing townfolk with her asanawa cord and squeezed them dead.

“Hisarya!” Ursula cried.

“Jetsunma,” Hisarya said in vexspeech so loudly it echoed across the entirety of Bodhi. “I am Jetsunma, to whom you shall bow.”

And when her parents did not bow, she bound them in cord so they prostrated perpetually before her in the dirt.

VI

There is nothing obvious about the picture of the world we have obtained using the scientific method. Molecules, quarks, atoms, billions of stars and galaxies, meat that knows it's sentient—what is this madness?

And, of course, one might ask: is the scientific model of reality not just another kind of magic, another absurd, fanciful delusion?

The answer is: yes.

However, it also happens to be the only delusion that doesn't go away when one stops believing in it.

- Excerpts from **The Empirical Sutras of Lady Ursula**

1.

On a world, beneath three moons, rolled a carriage.

The carriage was drawn by two creatures called bivniks—a horn sprouting from each of their noses and curling back around as though to aim at the brain.

Inside the carriage were two natives: a young woman and Leo Tereshkov.

The young woman looked about Leo's age. She wore Bodhi church robes and they were purple, meaning Science Division. Once or twice, Madeleine nuzzled up against the woman's spyle and Leo and the woman smiled politely to each other.

The woman spent the journey reading a book about cloud types. Occasionally she would finish a passage and look out the window, apparently processing whatever it was she'd read.

Clearly she was thoughtful; perhaps introverted too. Every flick of her hair and furrow of her brow further confirmed to Leo that this woman was his other, that if he could only start a conversation then she would see it too.

Maybe when they arrived at Gearheart University, they would take a walk through the grounds of the campus together. She would tell Leo of lovers past, of her loneliness, of the many years of compromise born of not knowing there was an alternative to dull half-love.

At midnight, under moonlight, by a fountain, Leo would take the woman's hand.

You have spent years in subpar friendships and flings, Leo would say without stuttering. *You have spent years lost, unable to find your place in the world. But all of this was to serve the function of demonstrating to you what love is not, so that when you came upon the real thing, you would know it by contrast to its previous imitations.*

I have been on that same pilgrimage. We have found each other now and I love you madly and unconditionally. We will go to parks and read

together. We will come home and hold each other long into the small hours. We can live forevermore, side by side, in the Sunshine Middle of the World.

The woman got off at the next outpost town.

“Goodbye then,” she said.

“Yes, bye,” Leo said.

2.

Towards midnight and Gearhart University appeared on the horizon.

The main campus was a collection of towering and bulbous domes, huddled together as though in architectural conspiracy.

The carriageman dropped Leo and Madeleine on the outskirts of the main campus. Madeleine took the shape of a cape and dangled from Leo’s back. They walked into town.

A phalanx of bodhiguard were beating up a homeless man. The man cried out in Gearheartian. The bodhiguard laughed and jeered back at him in Bodhitongue.

Leo and Madeleine looked for inns, but it was late and they found only signs reading what Leo knew from his limited Gearheartian to be '*Full*'.

Madeleine zipped off intermittently, and finally returned reporting she had found a single inn that had a sign boasting ‘*Permanently Vacant*'. The building in question was a mess of boards and shimmering rock. Leo knocked on the door.

A bald woman of middle age answered the door and began chattering in Gearheartian.

Leo caught the words for *late* and *time.* She closed the door.

Leo knocked again. “Look. Sorry. We come from distant. Sleep here now please, yes?” he said in his best Gearheartian. The woman repeated her refusal.

As she was about to shut the door, Madeleine exploded into the Bodhi mandala, the golden spiral of Empress Jetsunma, filling the street with its twisting convolutions. “Please,” Leo said. “We’re from the church.” The

woman covered her eyes, muttered the obligatory holy chant, and beckoned Madeleine and Leo in.

There was grime on every wall and the place reeked of old food. The woman showed Leo to a room. The bed was unmade. It hovered in an ek field, but the generator was broken so the bed hung down on one side. The woman weakly bowed to them and disappeared down the hall.

Leo looked at himself for a long time in the bathroom mirror. He was unshaven and dirty and his hair was greasy and growing more outward than down.

I'm hideous. Cheeks puffy, spots—not hideous in some noble, burden-carrying way, but simply hideous, everything in wrong proportion.

He looked his mind over as he had done his face. That was ugly also.

He got into bed. To Madeleine he said, "If anyone tries to enter the room, would you electrocute them, please?"

Madeleine glowed green and span clockwise in the affirmative.

He rubbed his wrists. Even in the half-dark, they still shone red raw with a decade of shackles.

I am free of Bodhi a while, he thought.

I have crossed hundreds of light-years in a week.

I am breathing alien air under alien stars.

I feel nothing.

3.

Leo's dreams were nonsense.

He saw Ursula crying. He saw Bodhi burning.

He saw the vexmule that had dragged him across the black of space to Gearheart.

He saw a hole in the sky. It was expanding across the sky rapidly, eating suns. Soon half of the sky was abyss.

Beneath the abyss was Hisarya riding atop an elephant. She was a little girl again and wore her crown of blue fire. She sported an infinitely long whip and thrashed the elephant over and over.

The elephant was perpetually crying. Its tears hit the ground heavy as boulders and opened the ground.

Behind the elephant trudged Ursula and Johannes. They were dressed in rags with faces grubby, holding each other for balance.

Behind them trailed the Holy Court, the hundreds of oshos and hemi-oshos of Hisarya's congregation, bearing their staffs and sceptres and bolts.

And finally, up the rear, marched the ten thousand phalanxes of the Bodhi Army, shields forward, scimitars raised, eyes fierce.

The elephant's tears continued to crash into the ground creating a cavern, and the entire procession descended into the cavern.

Hisarya and the elephant were gone first.

Then Ursula and Johannes.

Then the Holy Court.

Finally the Bodhi Army.

The ground collapsed back in on itself and all were buried.

4.

Leo's bedroom door was kicked open. In the dark of the doorway stood the silhouette of a very wide and very tall man. The man tried removing his tunic and trousers, fell over, grunted, and collapsed in bed beside Leo. He reeked of alcoholic spirits.

"Sorry, but this your bed not," Leo said in Gearheartian.

"Ownership is a relative notion," the man replied in Bodhitongue.

Snoring followed.

Leo sat up, glared at Madeleine. "What happened to electrocuting intruders?"

She disappeared under the bed to be ashamed.

5.

When Leo woke, his bedfellow was already up.

In the light now, the man was perhaps in his late forties, with olive skin and dark hair down to his hips, a cratered, tired face—though with shining eyes. He was sat cross-legged on the floor before what appeared to be an improvised bong constructed from a mop bucket and a halved wine bottle.

He blew out a fug of smoke. He said in almost perfect Bodhitongue, “My foreign friend! Would you care for a narcotic breakfast?”

“No thank you.”

Leo checked his coat pocket. Half of his Gearheart money was missing. “Did you rob me in the night?”

The man gestured to the bong. “This stuff is expensive, my friend.”

Leo cocked his head at Madeleine. She hummed to herself and examined the wallpaper very intently. Leo said, “I’m looking for the office of the dean of Gearheart University.”

“You seem a little wound up, my friend. Just one hit, try it.”

“I think the dean’s office is somewhere near the centre, but I’m not sure.”

His bedfellow lit the bong, though the bowl was empty now. “Say, if you spare a little more generosity, we can go buy some more.”

“No thank you. A pleasure to meet you.” Leo made a hand gesture and Madeleine clung to him as a cloak. He exited and descended the stairs into the hotel lobby.

The bald proprietress was sat in a rocking chair with a little boy on her lap. They watched Leo approaching with absolute attention, their heads swivelling as he passed. To the proprietress, Leo said, “I’m sorry, do you happen to know the way to the office of the dean of Gearheart University?”

The child said, “The journey is the destination.”

“Or do you have a map of Gearheart, maybe?”

The bald proprietress said, “A map is not the territory. A blueprint is not the house.”

“Right, thanks,” Leo said and stepped out into the day.

He wandered aimlessly about the city. Now and then he spotted church officials and bodhiguard. Hisarya’s army had reached the world only three

weeks before, and already it appeared conquered, or near enough. No one seemed to recognise Leo anyway and that was a blessing.

He looked about randomly for the dean's office. The street signs were all written in broken Bodhitongue, the population having had the language forced on them just after the annexation.

The Gearheart natives were rather taller than those on Bodhi, their faces narrower, their features darker. They wore far more complex clothing also, shawls of braids and threads, a constant reminder that humans here had lived alongside Devas, not under them.

A mural of Hisarya was painted on a house, her fur perfectly kempt, her whiskers gleaming.

Written in Bodhiscript below: *By Her perfect grace we bear the purrs and scratches of the world.*

6.

A tour group of Bodhi officials had congregated by the central library and Leo joined them. Everyone was talking in Bodhitongue, probably diplomats sent from the church to smooth the annexation.

The tour wound up the main street, and at every corner the guide paused to regale the group of how kind it had been of Empress Jetsunma to free Gearheart from the tyrannical grip of the Devan Union.

The tour finished in front of a sculpture. It looked to be marble and was at least fifty feet high; a Devan rabbit in a modest robe with a wild, smiling stare—a complex scientific instrument in its hand.

The guide said, "The dean of Gearheart University was originally Lady Ursula, who you will know, of course, as the Golden Mother. She was succeeded briefly by a foul and anarchic Deva known as *Lepus*. Subsequent to Empress Jetsunma's liberation of the university, Lepus went into hiding. When he is located he will be summarily executed in line with Empress Jetsunma's wishes. This statue is one of five to be demolished later today. I suggest you appreciate its fleetingness, heretical though it is."

The guide asked if there were any questions. Leo called sheepishly, "Might you point me to the dean's office?"

The guide replied that it was near the Physics Faculty, but the university was still closed following Empress Jetsunma's golden pohod, and praise be to Empress Jetsunma.

"Praise be to Empress Jetsunma," the crowd muttered in solidarity.

From behind Leo a gruff voice shouted, "Can folk still enter the inner grounds of the university?"

Leo turned to see it was his bedfellow from the night before.

The guide said, "Entry would be subject to approval from the local commander of the phalanxes. High-ranking church members are permitted."

The bedfellow pointed to Leo. "Well, he's as high-ranking as it gets."

"Be quiet, please," Leo whispered.

"It's Leo Tereshkov of the Geometric Family, look."

The tour guide covered his eyes with a hand and bowed to Leo. The crowd did the same. No one moved.

"Say something holy, my friend," the bedfellow murmured.

Leo stuttered, "Blessings of the Golden Empress upon you all."

"And upon you," the crowd chanted.

They didn't look up. The bedfellow sniggered into his tunic.

"And blessings of Bodhi upon you also," Leo tried.

"And upon you," the crowd chanted.

Still they didn't look up.

"So, let's. . .carry on with this fantastic tour," Leo said.

The crowd made the sign of the golden spiral on their foreheads. They opened their eyes and glanced at Leo with a mix of reverence and scepticism.

7.

When the tour was finished, Leo left a tip with the guide and departed quickly. The bedfellow followed behind.

“Say, my friend, your holiness, what’s a member of the Geometric Family doing on Gearheart?”

“I’m very busy. Please excuse me,” Leo said.

“Will the empress be paying us a visit?”

“I don’t know. Look, I really have to find the dean’s office.”

“We’ll need to go to the dean’s office for that.”

“Excellent, yes. Where is the dean’s office?”

“You’ve only just arrived. Best someone show you around first.” The bedfellow took his arm. “Those are the public baths. And that’s the bank. And that’s the cat pit.”

“What’s a cat pit?” Leo said.

They approached. Many cats were in a pit. Most were asleep, but some were mating or fighting.

“Best entertainment in town. Spend whole afternoons here I do sometimes, your holiness,” the bedfellow said and slapped Leo’s back.

Madeleine glowed orange and performed a complex twisting sequence that translated as: *He is not well and I am scared.*

“About the dean’s office,” Leo said.

“Yes, yes, your holiness. That building just over there.”

8.

The dean’s office was a dark room with a billiards table and a bar.

Leo said, “This is not the dean’s office.”

The bedfellow said, “My friend, we cannot enter into the machinations of academia without first fortifying our spirits.” The bedfellow ordered two large beers and two large gins.

“I don’t drink,” Leo said.

“Then I don’t show folk to their requested destinations. . .”

The bedfellow downed his beer in three gulps.

Leo hesitated. Alcohol was strictly forbidden in Bodhi, he’d never even tried it. He glanced at Madeleine. She span, *He might be mad, but if he*

knows something about the dean then perhaps we should play along.

Leo took a sip of his beer.

Well. It was not an unpleasant taste.

Suddenly the bedfellow began to yell in a tuneless melody, "*By Anaximander's golden dick we prostrate on the ground. Now, what's the world made out of? Well for that we must peer down, down, down, down—*"

Leo stared. The bedfellow tipped the beer to Leo's mouth. "*Down, down, down, down. . .*"

Leo drained the beer in drowning glugs, vomited slightly, swallowed it.

"There," the bedfellow said. "We are one step closer to Nibbana."

"About the dean's office, can we—"

The bedfellow pushed Leo's gin closer, sang, "*Well for that we must peer down, down, down, down. . .*"

Madeleine span, *Will you not die today, please?*

Within a few minutes the gin and beer took hold. Leo's head became full of warm marmalade and the usual neurotic mental noise had dimmed to a mutter.

So this is what the drunks are after, he thought. He said, "May I ask what you do in the town?"

The bedfellow mumbled to himself, looked down at his lap.

"Are you a labourer perhaps?" Leo said.

Silence.

A few bodhiguard passed the window, their matterspears glowing.

The bedfellow said, "What a pohod it was, what a crusade. You should've seen it. Aye, the empress' soldiers and her floating oshos throwing fire. They chased the old Devas right off the campus, right out of town. Those they caught they strung up on pikes. *On pikes!* You should've seen it, your holiness."

"Ah."

"But you're a member of the Geometric Family. I suppose you helped plan all that anyway."

Leo rubbed the shackle marks on his wrists. "I didn't help plan any of that."

The bedfellow said in a dark, gravel voice, “What a thing for you, living so close to divinity. I hear the empress sleeps with a teddy bear, is that true?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I hear she sucks her thumb and drinks from a bottle of milk with a little plastic teat in the evening.”

“I couldn’t say.”

Leo looked to the window. His dishevelled half-reflection looked back.

Beyond his half-reflection was lush, alien Gearheart; the public baths, the cat pit, and the glittering, bulbous domes of Gearheart campus.

The clouds bumbled by above. The cityfolk bumbled by beneath them.

And below all that: dirt and rock.

Then chemistry. Then physics.

Then whatever unfathomable engine powered the great Is.

And the great Is would never show itself, Leo knew.

And the radio would always play static.

And the days would forever remain a futile reaching in a dark room at a truth that had never been there anyway.

For the first time in his life Leo knew what it was to want another drink.

9.

By the fifth round of beers, Leo gave up on the day.

The bedfellow took him gambling and they lost most of Leo’s money.

The bedfellow took him to the cat pit again and they watched cats mating and fighting.

The bedfellow took him to a dance hall. They stood at the bar a while. Two women came up to the bar. The bedfellow swaggered over. The women burst out laughing. The bedfellow returned.

Next they visited a late-night teahouse. It was silent, full of folk reading. They located a table. Leo missed his chair and fell over.

The bedfellow filled the *no smoking* poster with tobacco, rolled it into a cigarette, and lit up. Leo laughed so hard he almost wet himself.

A waiter said in questionable Bodhitongue, “Gentlemen, we were just closing, I’m afraid.”

“Wine please,” the bedfellow said.

“We’re prohibited from serving alcohol here.”

“Prohibition is a relative notion.”

“Just two wines and we’ll be on our way,” Leo said.

The bedfellow ashed his cigarette in the teacup of a man on the next table.

“Sir,” the man said.

The bedfellow spat on the man. “That’s *Mr* Sir to you.”

It had not occurred to Leo before that a person could live almost entirely on their own terms, resisting the stifling rituals of the world simply by being drunk and vulgar. That required a depraved finesse even Hisarya didn’t have.

It seemed to him suddenly that self-hate was the result of a misguided attempt to please people one would never meet, and if one did meet such judgemental idiots, one would not respect them nor desire their respect in the first place.

He thought, *Alcohol is the true jhanamoksha.*

Two bodhiguard approached the table. They activated their matterspears, the tips burning indigo.

“What’s all this about?” one bodhiguard said.

“Wine please,” the bedfellow said and waved them away.

“Name and address.”

The bedfellow placed two menus on his head, resembling ears. “I am Lepus, the great Devan mathematician, and I am very displeased with my consumer experience so far. If you don’t fetch me two wines I will raze this establishment to the ground.”

A bodhiguard caught the bedfellow by the collar and dragged him across the floor. The bedfellow grabbed for the guard’s matterspear. It hit a table and the table exploded to pieces. The second bodhiguard took the

bedfellow’s legs and his matterspear hit the floor, blowing a hole in the stone.

The teahouse rocked. Patrons ran screaming. The guards threw the bedfellow into the road. They trained their matterspears on him and barked that he keep still or they’d end him.

Leo came running out. “It’s all right, I’ll take care of him. I’m so sorry for the fuss.”

A guard beat the bedfellow with the blunt end of his matterspear. The bedfellow only laughed manically.

“Wait just a moment, please,” Leo said weakly.

One guard smashed the bedfellow’s ribs while the other hammered his face. The bedfellow cried blood.

Leo hand-gestured to Madeleine. She exploded across the street in the golden spiral.

The bodhiguard froze, staring wide-mouthed at the mandala.

Leo said, “There’s been a bit of a misunderstanding. I’m from the Geometric Family. I’m Leo Tereshkov.” The bodhiguard covered their eyes and bowed to Leo. Leo added, “I’m so sorry about all this; I’ll pay for everything. Just please let him free; he’s my friend.”

“I’m not his friend,” the bedfellow said. “And if you let me back inside, I’ll fucking do it again.”

10.

For the last twelve years Leo had worked at Hisarya’s Arcane Laboratories within her great cathedral.

He spent the days shackled to a desk, doing little more than mid-grade clerical work, calculating routes in Vex for the Holy Court’s scouting parties across space.

He saw Ursula in the laboratories on the rare occasion she was admitted access for an experiment. Usually she was shackled to her own distant desk, trapped in bear-form by Hisarya.

Now and then a bodhiguard turned around to light a cigarette. Leo would put his hand on his heart, and Ursula would put her paw on her own.

One afternoon, without warning or ceremony, a guard had dragged Leo from his desk with a matterspear in his back and tossed him into the throne room. He lay there in the dark for what felt like several hours.

The lamps lit suddenly and a blinding flash exploded across his vision. When the flash abated, a wolf was levitating above Leo. It wore the red robe of an osho and sported many military medals on its pelt. It surveyed Leo with a disgusted sneer.

Leo said, “I thought my sister might want to talk at last. . .”

The wolf said, “The empress has no time to associate with vermin.”

Leo recognised the voice. “Pechev,” he said.

The wolf snarled, “*Osho* Pechev of the Holy Court.”

You jeered at Hisarya, drove her to whatever she’s become, Leo thought. *And yet she lets you live, makes you a god?*

Pechev said, “There is a vexmule waiting in the basilica courtyard. You are to leave for Gearheart in two hours.”

“What shall I be doing there?”

“*My lord,*” Pechev barked so loudly Leo’s eardrums stung.

“What shall I be doing on Gearheart, *my lord*?” Leo murmured.

“The last dean of Gearheart was a vile associate of your mother’s. *Lepus*, he styled himself as. He was not accounted for in the recent purge of Gearheart. We believe he may be hiding in the vicinity of the campus. You will travel across the black, seek him out, and gain his trust. Tell him you are defecting from the Holy Court or some such. Lord Mriga believes this heretic possesses the secret of jhanamoksha. Coerce him into divulging the secret. If he should not provide it, torture him until he does. When you have the information, end his life as painfully as possible and return here.”

Leo said, “My lord, I am not trained in violence.”

“Your mother’s spyle will accompany you. We believe she knew Lepus once, from during your mother’s deanhood at Gearheart University. This should lend to your false narrative of defection.” In Pechev’s paw materialised a sheet of parchment. He dropped it to the floor. He said, “This is the base notation of the jhanamoksha molecule you are searching for.” Leo glanced over the sketch, recognising Ursula’s careful hand. “Your

mother is *still* yet to perfect the admixture—perhaps she does not know it in full—but this is at least her depiction of its basic form. When you locate the vile rabbit, use near-deadly spyle force to have him complete the recipe."

Leo said, "My lord, spyles have vowed never to hurt other beings. Madeleine will not harm Lepus even if I locate him."

"In his infinite wisdom Lord Mriga has taken care of this."

"How, my lord?"

"It's of no concern to you. The spyle will torture when you tell it to and kill when you tell it to. Return with the rabbit's head."

Leo nodded gravely.

Pechev purred, "Let me answer what you are no doubt burning to know. If unholy thoughts of absconding from the church and the Geometric Family should creep into your mind while you're on Gearheart, you need only remember that a penalty will be incurred."

There's never any way out, Leo thought. "My lord?"

"The rodent has no strength but cunning. Develop any strange ideas about running from Bodhi, or forming a little resistance movement while away, and I'll have your parents gutted. I'll have them fed to the dogs. I'll have the dogs gutted and fed to the rats. I'll have the rats—"

"Understood," Leo said.

"The spyle and vexmule will be waiting in the courtyard."

11.

Leo hauled the bedfellow along the road. "Where do you live?" Leo said.

"In your bed."

"No you don't. Where do you live?"

"At the inn, same as you."

The bedfellow entered a shop and attempted to purchase a novelty-sized display bottle of champagne. The shop assistant informed the bedfellow it was for advertising purposes and made of plastic. The bedfellow informed the shop assistant this was the last time he would be treated in such a disrespectful manner and began to urinate on the coffee machine.

Leo dragged him out into the street and said, “If you don’t calm down right this minute, my spyle will electrocute you.”

Madeleine glowed yellow and span, *No I won’t. He’s sort of likeable.*

Leo said, “There, she’s ready.”

The bedfellow said, “I speak Spyle, idiot.”

Onwards in silence.

They passed through the main square and watched the statue of Lord Lepus being torn down by bodhiguard. Its ears smashed to dust on the pavement. Its nose rolled about on the ground. The bedfellow picked the nose up, launched it at a bodhiguard.

The soldier drew his matterspear, and Leo and the bedfellow set off running. Safe in an alley, the guards fallen back, Leo said, “What’s wrong with you?”

The bedfellow raised one of Leo’s wrists, the red shackle marks still shining. “What’s wrong with you, your holiness?”

They continued, through gates and over streams. Now the architecture was ancient, from the pre and mid-Devan eras, signs and inscriptions in Staritae; many of the buildings were hybrid geometry, half in threespace, half in Vex.

“I don’t think we’re heading towards the inn. This is the university campus, no?” Leo said.

“It’s a shortcut.” The bedfellow lit a cigarette and, in a surprisingly sober voice, said, “Tell me what you’re doing here.”

“I’m on church business.”

The bedfellow spat on the ground. “Don’t give me that. You’re meek and all over the place. If anything, the church wanted rid of you if they sent you all this way.”

“I’m on church business.”

They crept between domes and gardens, murals all about of giraffes and dogs and hyenas, their Devan names written above, many of which Leo recognised from Ursula’s history lessons; Lyra, Aquila, Perseus, Draco, and Lepus.

“How many native humans worked here? Do you know?” Leo said.

“Oh, hundreds. There was even some talk of electing a native as dean.”

“How do you know so much about it all?”

“Unlike you, your holiness, I watch the world closer than I watch myself.”

Leo said, “I’m not sure that’s—”

“Shyness is just narcissism for introverts. You’d do well to remember that.”

An arboretum, a cafeteria, a memorial shrine to a Deva engineer called Signus; all of it sporting matterspear burns and shrapnel scars.

“What happened to Lord Lepus, the last dean?” Leo said.

The bedfellow whistled. “Oh dead, or hiding. The rest of the Gearheart Devas are dead anyway. You should’ve seen them, running like little kids. Fire and death and more fire.” Shouting then, grinning wide: “They strung Lyra up by the hair and strangled her with her own asanawa cord. They burned Aquila on a pyre and threw his remains in the river. Draco? Who knows? His legs are still in Scholar’s Square, nothing else left.” He turned on Leo. “How far has Jetsunma’s pohod reached now? How many worlds are under her reign, your holiness?”

“Four,” Leo said stiffly. “Earth, Gearhart, Galatea, and Nebeto.”

“More to follow soon no doubt.”

“I don’t know.”

The bedfellow bowed before him. “But you do, Golden Brother Leo Tereshkov. Surely your own sister speaks to you of her military strategy—of her wants and schemes. Why, I heard she’s planning to push the Central Devan Territories back past the Meta-cluster. This isn’t some little rebellion.” He bowed lower. “It’s a try for galactic dominion.”

Leo said, “Who are you?”

“A scholar, your holiness.”

“What is your area?”

“All of them.”

The bedfellow scaled a tall wire fence and made it over to the other side with drunken grace.

“Hey!” Leo said.

“You want to get to the dean’s office? We’ll break in ourselves.”

“That’s *illegal*.”

Madeleine floated over the fence and joined the bedfellow's side. She span, *He seems like he knows what he's doing.*

"You said he was unwell!" Leo whispered.

A little quirky maybe.

Leo hesitated, watched the bedfellow and the spyle disappear into the dark. "Madeleine," he shouted. "Madeleine!"

Nothing.

He waited a while, kicked at the dirt.

Swearing, he scaled the face, lost his balance, and fell to the ground on his head.

12.

Black for a time. Then into Leo's vision came a woman, bald, the proprietress of the inn.

The proprietress said, "I'm worried he's too shy."

The little boy from the inn swam into view. "That can be overcome in time."

"What?" Leo cried out.

The bedfellow came next. The smoke from his cigarette twisted about in triple helixes. He said, "Ursula wouldn't have raised a coward."

The child said, "I didn't say he's a coward."

"Not too much fight about him though. . ."

The bald proprietress said, "*Fight* is not on the list of desired characteristics. He's young still; he'll learn. Needs must."

Leo glanced about, his eyes clearing: a circular room of charts and drapes and barely a free space not taken up by parchment and books. The floor was covered in arcane instruments of glass, loops of newmetal, the paraphernalia of some unknown science. Jade statues of a rabbit and a bear flanked the main door.

Madeleine floated over and made herself a pillar beneath Leo, standing him up. The child and the bald proprietress bowed in unison. The bedfellow snorted at their formality. The child said, "Leo Tereshkov, we are Sage

Lepus, custodian of the dimensional sciences. And, de jure, still dean incumbent of Gearheart University."

"*Who* is Lepus?" Leo said.

"All of us."

The bedfellow murmured, "Trifurcation, your holiness. The ancient vexological practice of cutting one's essence into three, either out of boredom, or to escape detection by, say, a mad empress with designs on separating one's head from one's body. The plan was your clever mother's, of course." Leo stared dumb. "Ask Madeleine to check us over if you don't believe it. You have Lepus' genetic model on file from the Bodhi archives, no?"

With shaking hands Leo gestured to Madeleine. She examined the child, the proprietress, and the bedfellow, sniffing at them as a curious dog might. She whirled a moment in thought, analysing.

Then, suddenly purring, she span, *My lord, I did not know a trifurcation had taken place.*

The bedfellow embraced Madeleine and kissed her casing. He said, "It was safer that way, beautiful. Sorry for keeping you out of the loop. How have you been?"

So-so.

The proprietress said, "Does the empress treat you and your family well?

No, torture. Torture every day.

"I'm so sorry. . ." the child said.

"And his holiness over there?" the bedfellow said, eyeing Leo suspiciously.

Please be kind to him—he has suffered a great deal also.

Leo shifted awkwardly. "It's worse for the spyles. . ." he muttered.

The bedfellow said, "Well then, now we're all chummy and you've finally made it to our office, what exactly was it you wanted with the dean?"

Leo's breath grew short. "I was sent to offer you a seat in the Holy Court."

The three Lepuses exchanged a glance. The child said, “Why were *you* sent, not an official emissary?”

“Because it was assumed you would try to contact me.” Leo thought, *A half-truth. . .* “My sister believes your expertise is highly valuable.”

The bald proprietress said, “Mr Tereshkov, our colleagues’ heads sit atop pikes all across Gearheart. We find it hard to believe this is a diplomatic assignment you have been dispatched on.”

Heart beating so hard Leo thought it must be visible, he said, “It was my mother’s idea. She recommended you.” *Please forgive me, Mama.*

The bedfellow said, “I see. And how is that stupid bear?”

“She’s fine.”

Madeleine span, *She is chained to a desk all day, kept in Deva-form against her will. They’re trying to force her to synthesise jhanamoksha.*

The Lepuses each raised an eyebrow at Leo.

“All right, yes,” Leo said. “That too.”

13.

A great cathedral of marble and newmetal stood at the heart of Bodhi. The cathedral was called La Geometrica Familia, or *The Geometric Family*—all filigrees and arches that looped back and around each other through Samsara and Vex.

To the east and west were large entrance portals. Above the east portal was the Nativity Facade. It depicted Ursula and Johannes fleeing from Johannes’ village.

Below was another scene: Ursula still in bear-form, holding up baby Hisarya.

Yet further below was the scene of Hisarya’s liberation. Here she was depicted as a girl of perhaps ten, with eyes of jade. Her expression was confident and sweet, transfixed on a point in the far distance, her lips just slightly parted as though considering some truth to which only she had access.

The final scene was of an ocelot, red of lip, cast in gold. Its eyes were slim and incurious, found its answers and resolute. The ocelot wore a blue tilak of lapis lazuli on its forehead. It sat on its back legs, a front paw raised. In its paw it held a morphing hypershape, the map of all possible geometries, which Hisarya was destined to control.

Above the west portal was the Victory Facade, made only of cheap granite. It depicted a fat and bald toddler, Leo. Ursula and Johannes were presenting him with gifts, and Leo was smashing them on the floor.

The next scene displayed Leo as even taller than his parents. He was holding Hisarya by the hair. Ursula and Johannes were laughing, their eyes closed in ecstasy.

The facade concluded once again with Hisarya as a golden ocelot, Ursula and Johannes bowing reverently to her. In Hisarya's paw this time was not the hypergeometric cruciger but Leo's bone-white skull.

14.

Travel inside La Geometrica Familia and one could not take in the true scale for many minutes. The nave alone was fifty folk high and the roof was supported by many spiralling crystal columns, somewhat reminiscent of trees.

Stained glass windows adorned each wall and made the nave very bright. Each window sported various scenes from Hisarya's life: abuse at the hands of her fat and juvenile brother, abuse at the hands of her senile and wicked parents.

At the apse of the cathedral, suspended in an ek field so it floated as though fixed in the air, was a golden effigy of Hisarya in ocelot-form. Her paws were extended as though in mid-pounce and her mouth was open to reveal sharp jade teeth.

Her robe was fixed in a constantly windswept position, and upon her robe was written the Golden Mantra:

Life without purpose is no life at all
as a lone ant in the great forest of inevitable death,

Let me be an instrument of the empress,
Let me be her legs and run to where she directs,
Let me be her hands and strangle those who despise her,
By the tooth, by the ear, by the claws of good grace
we shall bear the purrs and scratches of the world,
We shall reform the passing moment until it is forever,
We shall inherit Nibbana,
May Venerable Jetsunma reign without end,
Nema.

Milling about in the nave, as always, were the many initiates of the church. By day, the initiates were expected to go about the Bodhi countryside providing blessings, settling disputes, spreading the Gospel of Jetsunma. By evening, they returned with new initiates come to ordain or the heads of those who refused to.

Above the nave, up into the great tower, were the administrative levels —nuns and monks busying away over abacuses and parchment, executing tax audits, and certifying identification documents of Gearheartians and other refugees wishing to take up residence in Bodhi.

Further above still was the Arcane Library, the store of retrieved and translated Devan literature.

Finally, on the one hundred and fiftieth floor, was a single circular door of newmetal. Only high-ranking members of the church and Holy Court were allowed access, and only then by Hisarya's personal invitation.

Passing through the door, one would find not carpet upon the ground but small purple flowers that if one put their face up to could sting the eyes and warp the senses.

Next came an artificial forest—tang of perfume, of pine and lilac, and a small wooden temple beside a lake. This was Lord Mriga's dwelling, where he gazed for many hours into the water contemplating military or societal matters. He enjoyed a small personal plantation of moksha and attended to its maturation as one might a beloved child.

Into the forest, if one walked a while with careful eyes, a bridge might be spied. Over the bridge, passing through the monstrous facsimiles projected all about of screaming ghouls and querulous hags, one would

come upon Empress Jetsunma's private chamber. It was a circular room painted mild pink. It contained a plain bed, a writing desk, and various changes of ornate clothes—some for native-form, some for ocelot-form.

Upon the bed sat a giant teddy bear. Scattered about it were empty chocolate wrappers and tissues. The scene appeared as though a child had eaten a great deal of sugar, then tried to fall asleep upon the teddy bear, crying and alone.

15.

Hisarya sat in meditation. Her ocelot body resided on a cushion in Samsara. Her head was missing, however. It projected into Vex, her eyes closed, the blue tilak shining upon her forehead.

Mriga sat beside her in deer-form, his eyes also closed, his blue tilak also shining. He said, "What is the world?"

Hisarya said tiredly, "Diamond construct."

"And what are the senses?"

"Matchstick construct."

"And what is the self?"

"Sand construct."

"Maitreya, I think your heart is not set on practice today."

"I am a little tired from our experiments, my lord. . ." *Please,* she thought. *No more of this, just let me be for a week.*

Mriga took her paw. "When we are successful, all trials will be ended. We'll have dominion over pain, over suffering, over death."

"Yes. . ." she said in a strained voice, a lump growing in her throat.

"And you will no longer be ugly," Mriga said with uncharacteristic warmth in his voice. "No one will ever think you aberrant again. You will have won over them all." Hisarya wiped a tear away, nodded.

"We continue then," Mriga said and struck the ceremony gong.

Hisarya watched mental notions appear before her. She set them free as a magician liberates doves from a pan.

I am bored. My legs hurt. When is this session over?

Deeper then, to the second ledge of consciousness.

She found herself in that familiar mental clearing, the one of muffled sound and limited self.

What was the thing to which the name *Hisarya* referred? What was the essence of the thing to which *any* name referred?

Mriga struck the ceremony gong again. Hisarya opened her eyes and stared into Vex. The prayer chamber remained before her in threespace, though she saw its Vex extensions now.

She had long ago learned to make sense of the curious presentations of the world in four dimensions, but it was still not fully intuitive.

“What is line and form?” Mriga asked.

“Only mind externalised.”

“What is colour and geometry?”

“Only mind internalising.”

Mriga knelt before her with the new, experimental strain of concentrated jhanamoksha.

He whispered, “The storm is fierce, but your roots are unshakable.” He placed the pipe under Hisarya’s nostrils, and with one great puff blew the jhanamoksha up her nose.

Hisarya did not flinch or blink. She watched the pain in her nose and the dripping sensation in her throat; observed these things until they dwindled.

Her pupils dilated wide. Her perception grew exponentially larger until she was almost entirely made of perception.

“Steady,” Mriga purred.

She wanted to go off bounding with this new supercharged awareness, but watched the want and waited for it to die.

“Steady. . .”

Mriga struck the ceremony gong a third and final time, signalling that Hisarya undertake the perilous climb down to the last ledge of consciousness—Nibbana.

Her scarlet lips parted and her tongue protruded just slightly. Her brow furrowed and her eyes squinted, desperate, hunting for that thing beyond thingness, where True Form lived.

A dim crack of brilliant white light presented in Vex—the holy plane of Nibbana shining, singing to her. She peered in.

The waiting new world appeared infinite, an ecstatic, lilting waltz.

This was the source of all form, she knew. This was the northernmost point from where time and reality began, and bled into the lesser realms where she had resided all her years.

This was the womb and the grave and the nave and the sanctum.

From here she might rule the world with a finger, with a thought.

“There is. . .” she whispered.

“Yes, what do you see? Tell me what you see. . .”

“There is. . .”

“Yes. . .”

Her face ejected its colour. Her mouth widened and gave way to a silent scream. Her eyes rolled back to show only the whites.

She fell to the floor and did not move.

Mriga looked down on her with impartial eyes a while. Then he took the limp and almost weightless sack of her body onto his back and carried her to bed whereupon Hisarya slept for four days and dreamed of nothing.

16.

Several floors below Hisarya’s chamber was a small, stark laboratory. Chained to a desk there sat the great bulk of Ursula, her eye to the lens of a microscope.

Osho Pechev entered the laboratory without knocking, his wolf teeth bared. He said, “The empress has once again reacted unfavourably to your jhanamoksha attempt. You will terminate the current recipe and begin work on another.”

Ursula muttered, “Much more of this and there won’t be an empress left to experiment on. . .” She brandished her chained paws. “If in her infinite wisdom the empress sees fit to make me a person again, I’m sure the work can proceed quicker. Claws aren’t so great for chemistry.” Ursula turned

away, attempting to make the next sentence appear an afterthought. “When might I see my husband?”

Pechev snorted, “You’ve failed yet again. Recreation without proper work is sloth.”

Pechev’s hand on the door then, Ursula said quickly, “I’ll have a new variation of the molecule ready by next week.”

“Perhaps you’ll see your husband next week then.”

“Please,” Ursula said. She caught Pechev’s eye. “It’s been months. Please.”

Pechev collected up the inkwells about the room and threw them over the balcony. He said, “You will notate the new molecule by the end of the week. As for your husband, if you cannot complete your duties, you will not receive the empress’ magnanimity.”

“And what shall I notate the new molecule on now you’ve kindly disposed of the inkwells?”

Pechev took a blade from his robe and laid it on the desk. “Empress Jetsunma makes no distinction between black and red ink.”

Alone again, Ursula cried a while. Then, forcing the feeling back down, she wiped her eyes.

She peered into the microscope. She pulled a lever and the view changed to Vex. She watched her molecule in four dimensions now; the altered moksha recipe that had, not but an hour ago, brought her daughter to the door of death.

While chemistry in threespace was limited to element, compound, and mixture, Vex made possible superior, more geometrically complicated molecular extensions: metamixture, lattice, hyperbonded, and anaximandic. Despite the many years Ursula had spent trying to understand these odd geometries, it was still far from instinctive.

She discarded the faulty molecule. She took up the knife and bled herself and wrote her report with the blood.

Then carefully, in her best Bodhi handwriting, she added below, *Hisarya, please just tell me your father is well.*

17.

Pechev went next to the Arcane Library where the sages and scholars spent their days.

Two hundred red-robed men and women sat in silent study over reading desks, reviewing the collected spoils of the Myriad of Man and the Devan eras, searching for informational relics.

Pechev found the Low Librarian at his desk, a swan of frayed feathers, his scabbed feet shackled to the floor.

“Heretic,” Pechev said.

“My lord,” Johannes muttered.

Pechev cut Johannes’ shackles open in Vex, extended a paw. “The people are ready for you.”

Conditioned by years of this ritual, Johannes took Pechev’s paw in his wing and closed his eyes and held his breath.

Pechev walked them through screaming Vex fractals, through the wailing frenzy of higher-dimensional space.

They exited Vex on a stage, a crowd already gathered and quiet. At the sight of Johannes, the crowd erupted into cheering and applause. Johannes recognised the location immediately by the great mountain and the deep valley.

Hisarya, where he had been born. Hisarya, where he had met Ursula. Hisarya, where—

Pechev shoved a ream of parchment into Johannes’ wing, muttered, “Perform tricks, receive treats.”

Johannes hobbled to the wooden dais and unfurled the parchment. The crowd died to a reverent whisper.

Johannes stared about with slow, red eyes. The crowd wore robes of silk and cotton, many of their faces painted with brown and gold spots in devotion to Hisarya’s ocelot-form. The village yurts were gone, replaced with structures of marble and newmetal. The forest was gone too, now apartments and high-rise dwellings.

Pechev yelled, “The Golden Father speaks!” He discreetly kicked Johannes’ bottom.

Monotone, Johannes read from the parchment. “Friends, workers, devotees. . .”

He praised the farmers who tended to the hunger of the Bodhi Empire. He praised the parents who had given their children to the religious temples of the Bodhi Empire. He praised Jetsunma many, many times.

“Why,” he read flatly, “it seems like only yesterday that I lived on these great plains, the hum of revolution in the air, the righteous fervour we drew from to overthrow the vile Devan Union.”

More cheering, more applause. The crowd cried Johannes’ name. They let off decorative explosions of coloured powder.

Dry as a corpse’s tongue, he recounted the annexation of Gearheart and the sacking of Nebeto. He promised that the empress was all-powerful and all-knowing, that she saw beyond sight and soon would kill pain.

He paused at the final lines, almost unable to speak. Pechev jabbed him in the back.

“As ever, my wife and I are eternally apologetic for our negligence of Empress Jetsunma when she was a child. It is in spite of our parenting that she became so wise and compassionate, not a result of it.” He raised his wing as the parchment dictated, said, “The empress shall deliver us to Nibbana. Nema.”

“Nema,” the crowd replied as one.

Johannes bowed feebly and took Pechev’s paw.

Vex, fractured light, shrieks, and they had returned to La Geometrica Familia, to Johannes’ cell. Pechev materialised a scrap of bread and threw it to the floor

Johannes went down on his belly, eating desperately. Pechev watched in disgust. Johannes looked up from his hungered frenzy suddenly and wiped his beak. He said, “I should like to see my wife.”

Pechev only chuckled and left.

Johannes stared from his cell window. He could easily make out the charred remains of what had once been the Tereshkovi family house on its hill in the distance.

Beyond that were the charred remains of the countryside.

And beyond that, perhaps, were the charred remains of the world.

He thought of the Night of the Ocelot: the blue flames emanating from Mriga's temple, the murderous screaming as Mriga butchered those Devas unfaithful to the cause, those opposed to native servitude—of which, it had transpired, there had been surprisingly many.

He thought of little Hisarya, streaked with dirt, entreating help. He thought of her face sprouting whiskers and her eyes falling to murderous indifference.

Then, when all the blood was shed, when all the Bodhi townfolk were either dead or had submitted, Hisarya merged Bodhi with Mriga's temple and the many surrounding native villages. She wore a crown of blue fire always, and set Mriga at her left hand, and Pechev at her right.

She met those Devan Union ambassadors who visited in concern at the news. She separated the ambassadors' heads from their bodies. She threw the heads back through Vex, across space, to the Meta-cluster where the Golden Council resided. Ambassadors soon stopped coming.

Johannes watched the belching coal burners on the outskirts of Bodhi. He watched the phalanxes moving uninterrupted through the streets, pushing folk aside, turning stalls over.

He watched the hill where the Tereshkovi house had once stood.

He listened for the faint, time-trapped echoes of children playing, of markets thriving, of the hopeful mornings in the quiet service of building a town, of the glad evenings spent thinking of the good, passed day, and looking forward to the next.

Rubble.

18.

Leo said to the Lepuses, "Again, on behalf of my mother, all three of you would be welcome in the Holy Court."

The bald proprietress said, "We find that somewhat hard to believe. Tell me, Mr Tereshkov, what is the Holy Court's position on the bivnik effect?"

Quietly Leo said, "They consider it a conspiracy theory propagated by the Devan Union to hold Bodhi's greatness at bay."

"And what is *your* position on bivnik, Mr Tereshkov?"

“I am not learned enough to possess one. . .”

The bedfellow rolled his eyes and mumbled something to Madeleine. She exploded into a fug of dust. After a moment the dust resolved into countless large and small spheres.

The bedfellow said, “Your holiness, before you tell us what you’re *actually* doing here, meet the million populated worlds of the Golden River. Or, as you native folk call it, the Milky Way.”

The proprietress said, “Up until your sister’s campaign, these worlds were all under the banner of the Devan Union, held loosely together by the Golden Council.”

The child said, “Four worlds are under your sister’s control now, of course. Given enough time she’ll overthrow the entire Devan Union.”

Leo murmured, “My sister’s powerful, but not all-powerful. She can’t expand her empire to *a million* worlds.”

The Lepuses exchanged a glance. The bedfellow said, “But she can. To our knowledge there is no Deva in the empire who can produce moksha internally. Even our greatest academics—” He gave a wink. “—have been unable to synthesise production inside the body itself. Her biology is unique. We still don’t understand why yet.”

The child said, “She took Gearheart by surprise attack. The strategy was perfect. She cut off the moksha supply lines from Bodhi, then sent a few hundred oshos down here when the resident Devas had gone into moksha withdrawal. The same technique worked on Galatea and Nebeto. Soon she will probably attack the other moksha plantation worlds, giving Bodhi a monopoly. There’ll be no hope then. Her strength isn’t moksha but depriving others of it. There’s no defence against this in the long run.”

Leo said, “I see.” He thought, *Madeleine should be strong enough to bind all three of them. The child might slip through, but what threat is he anyway?* He said, “Is there anything we can do about her campaign?”

The bedfellow said, “She’s only another head of the bivnik hydra. In the miraculous event we stop your sister, we still have galactic resource depletion to contend with.”

Leo said, “The Devan Union has been around for thousands of years. If you’re right, why haven’t *they* exhausted the galaxy’s resources already?”

“Moksha,” the child said. “It took you a week to travel from Bodhi to Gearheart, even with the vexmule at full trot. Travelling to further star systems by Vex can sometimes take years, decades, centuries even. The population collapse problem has always been looming in the background of Devan society, but it was kept in check by the limit of moksha’s potential. Colonies are still relatively slow to establish.”

The proprietress said, “All this will change if your sister gains access to jhanamoksha.”

Leo muttered, “Five degrees of spatial freedom. . .”

“Exactly. And with it, the ability to travel between worlds not in months or years, but minutes. Madeleine tells us Mriga has coerced—or more likely, threatened—your mother into helping with the jhanamoksha project. Still, Ursula isn’t stupid. She’s no doubt already trying to sabotage the research, but she must know it’s only a matter of time until she runs out of molecular configurations to fool Mriga with.”

“And then?”

The bedfellow said, “If your sister acquires a working recipe somehow, she could overrun the galaxy in, by our genius estimations, a few hundred years. And even if she dies after all that, even if she gets her head put up on a pike like our colleagues and her whole grubby empire is burned to the ground, the secret will be out. There’ll be no forgetting jhanamoksha. It will become the new default mode of transport. Every sun in the galaxy will be drained and mined and sucked dry of stoyanium, burned barren, filched, fucked in the extreme, your holiness. No more picnics. No more beer. No more conscious carbon nonsense.”

The proprietress said, “*That* is the primary threat to galactic life: ultimate power. Population spread will accelerate to maximum until all galactic resources are depleted. Absolute bivnik. Without your sister’s efforts, the threat was a millennium away. Thanks to her, it’s now only centuries distant at most.”

Leo said coyly, “But didn’t my mother find a way to make jhanamoksha work? That’s the rumour.”

The bedfellow said, “Perhaps.”

“Then she must have told the mystery to you three. Couldn’t we use the technology to combat my sister, to make sure her campaign never expands beyond the worlds she’s already taken?”

The child said, “Say we knew the secret, say we weaponised it to beat your sister all the way back to Bodhi. Say we even took Bodhi from her and made the world a garden paradise and liberated your parents and filed down all the sharp edges of the world. What do you think would happen next?”

Leo said, “The threat would be gone.”

The proprietress laughed darkly. “No, Mr Tereshkov. It would only have started. You’re still not listening. Your sister is just another instrument of bivnik, another cosmic expression of the constant interplay between improvement and the longing to improve yet more. There were ten thousand despots before her. Ten thousand more will follow. It is the tools that build the wielders, not the other way around. Jhanamoksha must *never* be discovered. It will herald the end of galactic society. That is why even if we knew the recipe, we would not tell it to you.”

The bedfellow muttered something again to Madeleine, and the floating worlds collapsed back to dust. “Now then, how about a drink?”

The Lepuses began to talk among themselves, the bedfellow mixing neon alcohols from a cabinet.

Leo readied himself. He felt his heart beating in his feet, in his head, could barely catch his breath.

He turned to Madeleine, began the hand gestures that would initiate the violence protocols.

Mama, he thought. *I’m sorry.*

Without turning around, the bedfellow said, “Your holiness, there are two more items on the docket to make you aware of.”

Leo froze. “Yes,” he croaked.

“We weren’t lying about trifurcation. We took this three-form appearance not just to hide from your sister’s army of harsh love, but so the secret of jhanamoksha would be split across three minds, rather than helpfully stored inside one. If someone were to attempt to extract the secret from us with, oh, I don’t know, a spyle abused to the point of corruption, we couldn’t piece it together for you even if you ripped our legs off until we hollered uncle.”

Leo murmured, “Well—”

The child said, “Furthermore, while you were unconscious we took the liberty of removing Madeleine’s Bodhi imprinting. She’s back to her old

self and won’t follow requests of a sadistic flavour.”

“Look, you’ve got this wrong,” Leo said, a hair from panicking.

The bedfellow brought a slip of parchment from his tunic. Leo recognised it as Ursula’s jhanamoksha molecule.

Leo said, “You *stole* that from me.”

“Sure did. The molecule is wrong anyway, probably intentionally so, but let’s not get into it. More interestingly, your holiness, there is a message written in ultraviolet ink on the back, rather cleverly avoiding the detection of your sister and her lackeys.”

Leo said, “Is it readable?”

The bedfellow took up a little blue-tinted lens. “When you know how, yes.”

Leo rushed over, but the bedfellow put an arm out. “Fetch him a drink.”

The child poured a large glass of whisky. The proprietress brought a chair.

Leo said, “What does it say?”

The proprietress pulled him into the chair. The child delivered the whisky. The bedfellow said, “Drink.”

Leo drank until the glass was empty.

“Another,” the bedfellow said.

The child poured another. Leo drank.

“Maybe one more.”

“No,” Leo said, the first true stand he had taken on this world, on any world. “Let me read it. Please.”

19.

It was upon the great engineers’ planet of Tekla that shipments of moksha ceased suddenly.

The controllers of the world appealed to the Golden Council only to be told the matter was out of their hands.

In the absence of moksha, the Teklan Devas grew fog-headed. Their sight began to dim and soon Vex became a place of geometric terror.

One by one they fell back into Samsara, their minds collapsing inwards like deflated balloons, their temples and palaces suddenly impossible to navigate.

By the fourth day they were defenceless and knew so, attempting to rebuild the gunpowder weapons of their distant ancestors though without competency.

So it was the effigy of the ocelot appeared in the sky: blue, sparkling, indomitable.

So it was that Empress Jetsunma descended on the temples and palaces and asked that all bow before her.

So it was that Tekla found itself blessed enough to become the fifth world to fall under Empress Jetsunma's benevolent rule.

20.

On the one hundred and twenty-third floor of La Geometrica Familia was Sinner's Drop—a long and thin balcony that sported no handrail.

Close to midday the Holy Court gathered upon Sinner's Drop: demi, semi, and full oshos; several high-ranking members of the bodhiguard; as well as the Geometric Parents themselves, Ursula and Johannes Tereshkovi.

Ursula was shackled to General Emilova to ensure no attempt of escape, and her mouth was muzzled. Johannes was shackled to Semi-osho Mitkov.

It was the first time the couple had seen each other in months. Confined at separate ends of the Holy Court, they strained to meet eyes. On each attempt a guard or osho would smack them about the head and pull them back in line.

Many thousands of Bodhi citizens gazed up in reverence from the ground. They'd heard news of Tekla's liberation and were eager to see the enemies of Empress Jetsunma meet their rightful fate.

The air warped a moment and Hisarya appeared in ocelot-form upon a throne of gold and jade. Her furry ears were looped in silk. From her neck dangled pendants and chains of silver and newmetal.

The Holy Court bowed. Ursula did not bow and General Emilova pulled her down by her chains.

Just as it seemed Hisarya was about to begin an address, Lord Mriga and Osho Pechev appeared beside her, deer-form, wolf-form, bejewelled and perfumed.

Mriga kept his speech in Samsara for the peasantry though with obvious distaste. “Tekla has fallen to the righteous pohod of Bodhi and its sacred mission. The Devas and natives of Tekla are liberated, and shall in time join our cause. Our movement shall be richer for their wisdom. Our hearts shall be larger for their kindness.”

“Praise to the empress,” the crowd cried from below.

“In accordance with Lord Anaximander’s teachings, we continue to reclaim those worlds presided over by the spiritually corrupt consortium of the so-called Devan *Union.* Their days of reign are numbered.”

The crowd cheered for Hisarya.

Ursula thought, *At least Anaximander isn’t here to see this. He’d die of a broken heart.*

Mriga cried, “As others join, the speed and righteousness of our pohod will increase tenfold. We will take one hundred new worlds each week, one thousand, *one million*. There will be no confinement of our strength, no exhaustion of our volition, no limit to our compassion. We shall not rest until every native and Deva is free.”

“Praise, praise, praise!” came the cheer of the crowd.

“But, my friends, liberation is not a road without obstructions. When offered the key to their cell, many wish to still remain inside it. If we are to cultivate beautiful roses in our garden, we must also tend to the weeds.”

The rebels of Tekla were brought onto the ledge, all of them appearing as natives now, still stumbling with moksha withdrawal. They wore only blood-stained rags—unshaven, dishevelled, chained to one another.

Mriga said, “My friends, is it so that you still refuse to accept the love of the Geometric Family?”

One of the men began shouting something in Teklan. The language was close enough to Staritae that Ursula could follow the meaning of the thing. *You are false gods.*

A translator reported, “They claim they will continue to defy your golden will, Empress.”

Mriga said, “So be it. Heretics of Tekla, in accordance with the sutras, the price for heresy is extinction from Samsara. May your flight return you to sense.”

Ursula peered along the Holy Court and caught Johannes’ gaze. She attempted to smile to him from behind her muzzle.

Johannes nodded and mouthed that he loved her. He called out, “Hisarya, stop. Do you really want this?” General Mitkov kicked him in the ribs, bent his wing backwards. Hisarya did not acknowledge the outburst, her face neutral and unchanged. Johannes tried again. “It’s that damn deer; he’s turned you wicked. Come back to us, it’s not too late. Come back to Mama and me. We can fix all of this.”

Mitkov wound the chains about Johannes’ neck until he choked.

Silence on the ledge a moment, save for the flapping of holy robes and singing of wayward wind.

Mriga said, “Teklans, you have been corrupted with False Sight and False Knowledge. I offer my blessings upon your next life. May you return as wiser creatures.”

Her eyes set on the horizon, Hisarya gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Pechev delivered a kick to the first Teklan prisoner. The man went over the ledge, screaming. The second prisoner followed, pulled by the first’s shackles. The third went next then, the fourth, the fifth.

Two bodhiguard brought the second group of prisoners to the edge of Sinner’s Drop.

“Hisarya!” Johannes cried. “Please.”

Once again she ignored the outburst and gave a small nod to Pechev. Once again Pechev readied a kick.

Ursula raised a straggled paw to Johannes. Johannes raised a fray-feathered wing in return.

With the last reserves of strength Ursula collected up her chains, spinning them around her wrists. General Emilova began to yell, seeing immediately what she intended, though could not stop her fast enough.

In a moment Ursula had fashioned the chains into a pulley. She strained towards the edge of the balcony.

Johannes did the same, gathering his chains in a dervish whirl, dancing for the edge with all the force left in him, Mitkov desperately trying to resist.

Watching from the ground, the people of Bodhi caught sight of a brown, feminine bulk plummeting earthwards to death—followed down by a screaming military woman.

Behind that fell a second couple: the distant warble of a screaming military man, followed by a shackled swan who did not once try to open his wings.

21.

When Leo was done reading the letter he only sat in confused silence.

The proprietress said, “I’m sorry, Leo. We got word a few hours ago from Earth. They’re both gone. Your mother must have been planning this for some time.”

Leo ran for the door. The child blocked it. “Mr Tereshkov, where are you going?”

“Please get out of my way. I must go home.”

The bedfellow said, “If you do that then your mama and papa’s sacrifice will have been for nothing.”

“Get out of my way.”

“Oh, what’s the big plan, your holiness? March back into your sister’s palace and dethrone her with what, Madeleine?”

The child put a hand on Leo’s shoulder. He said gently, “Please, stay here just a little while longer, collect yourself. We’ll leave you to your thoughts as long as you need. When you’re ready, there’s one last thing we’d like to show you before you set off back for Bodhi.”

22.

The Lepuses gone, Leo found there was simultaneously every emotion and no emotion in him.

Madeleine span, *I'm so sorry, Leo. Would you like me to leave as well?*

"Yes."

She disintegrated, making to pass through the office door.

"No," Leo murmured. "No, I would not like you to leave as well."

The great sobs of a child then, he collapsed to his knees. Madeleine wrapped about him like a blanket.

He laid on the floor with the ultraviolet lens reading the letter over and over.

His tears exploded on the parchment and the ink began to run as though it too were crying.

23.

The entourage was waiting when Leo and Madeleine emerged from the office.

"Finished blubbing?" the bedfellow said.

The child kicked him in the ankle and said, "Are you quite ready, Mr Tereshkov?"

"Whatever you want to show me, it won't change my mind."

"We'll see."

They led him through the dead faculties, decay everywhere, academics' bodies still lying murdered from Hisarya's pohod.

Perhaps trying to alleviate the grim mood, Madeleine span, *Is it possible the three of you might recombine at some point?*

The child said, "Ursula left behind the technology to trifurcate us, but not to undo the process. Without understanding the initial technique, we'd likely be putting ourselves in great danger." The child eyed the bedfellow sceptically. "Not to mention, *some* of us are resistant to recombining on principle."

"They don't even *drink*. . ." the bedfellow muttered.

More deadness. More dust.

At last they came to a large statue of Anaximander sitting in full lotus, gazing up at his meta-yes.

The bedfellow tweaked the statue's nose. The floor shimmered with extra-dimensional currents, then turned transparent to reveal cavernous chambers below.

"Gods . . ." Leo whispered.

Native men and women were bustling about in libraries, in laboratories, in offices that were neither dusty nor abandoned, but alive with quiet work.

In a long test chamber, a woman launched a metal spear through the air. The spear vanished a moment, then appeared fifty feet distant in a blink.

"What is *this*?" Leo said, his grief abating a moment.

The proprietress said, "The *true* university, if you will, Mr Tereshkov. We've long suspected Mriga might make an attempt on Gearheart. Ursula and ourselves devised a plan long ago to prepare for such an occasion. It appears we were not paranoid in our caution."

Feeling an idiot, Leo nodded to the test chamber, the woman readying to throw the spear again. "This looks like Vex travel. How can that be possible when Hisarya cut Gearheart off from the moksha supply?"

The child said, "It is not moksha that gives Devas their supremacy, but *technology.* If your sister wants to confiscate the holy flower, fine. But we'll find other ways around it."

Leo murmured. "You can travel in fourspace without moksha?"

The bedfellow said, "We haven't perfected it; the technique isn't quite safe for living things yet, but we aren't far off." Then, his eyes gleaming: "See what we'll do when we nail it though. We'll build vexboats and vexgalleys. We'll build entire defence fleets in orbit: vehicles that can slip through fourspace just like Devas do with their purple flowers, just like we used to, only no reliance on stoyanium or farming plantations. We'll retake Gearheart, retake the annexed worlds, and kick your sister right back on her arse. The whole Devan Union will eventually switch to technological Vex travel, rather than clinging to this stupid jhanamoksha fantasy. Bivnik will be slowed, and we can begin to tackle it properly. This is the beginning of the Age of Adulthood, your holiness."

Leo watched the work below, the test tubes and centrifuges, the blackboards and adding machines, and said dejectedly, "What do I do with

knowing this now? Just go home?”

“No,” the Lepuses said in unison.

The bedfellow said, “You may’ve come to take our heads off, but we don’t hold it against you.”

Leo made a noise in protest, but the bedfellow cut in with, “Don’t insult our intelligence; we were gods once. You intended to do a horrible thing while under duress, we get it. Spot us a few drinks at the Physics Faculty bar and we’ll let the whole episode go.”

The child said, “In the meantime we’d like to make you an offer.”

The bedfellow bowed deep and ironically. “Leo Tereshkov, your holiness, perennial abstainer of fun, apparent bore with a good heart, we are sorry for your loss. But your parents did what they did so Hisarya could never keep a hold on you again. They’re gone, I’m sorry. But you’re free to remake yourself now, here, *now*, on Gearheart. You could be an icon among the people, the rebellious brother of the evil empress. The Gearheart folk would swear allegiance to you immediately—the annexation has been too much for their pride. You’ve read the letter. This is what Ursula wanted.”

Leo opened his mouth and found he could not speak.

The child said, “Assume the role of dean of Gearheart University. Use the knowledge and technologies here to stage a resistance against your sister, if not for the sake of the people of Bodhi, then for the protection of the rest of the Devan Union, in the name of subverting the bivnik effect, in the name of a return to humanity, to devanity. We will stand by your side, as advisors, as mentors, as friends.”

Leo still could not speak, and so the proprietress said, “Mr Tereshkov, it is with great pleasure that we can confirm you have been selected as the new dean of Gearheart University, to begin in the position with immediate effect. Do you accept?”

24.

Evening was just coming on, the Gearheart sky burning purple, all the faculties burning purple beneath.

The bedfellow found Leo in the observation tower. He was slumped against the glass, Madeleine curled around his shoulders, a bottle of vodka in his lap.

The bedfellow said, “Back when your mother was dean, the planet was heating up something wicked, what with all the industry. She had the bright idea of filling the air with reflective particles of silver. They’re small enough not to harm the body when breathed in, but large enough to reflect just enough of the sunlight so the planet doesn’t melt its ice caps. Plus, every now and then we get a neat purple sunset.”

Leo stroked Madeleine in silence and drank.

“I think maybe I shouldn’t have shown you the wonders of alcohol.” The bedfellow sat down beside Leo and they passed the bottle back and forth.

“You knew my mother,” Leo said finally.

“Sure. In a romantic capacity for a short time even, but let’s not talk about that. Or we can talk about that.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Then yes, I knew your mother. Our antics stretch back two millennia. She was a good friend and a decent theoretician.” In a voice that strained just a moment, he added, “You’re not the only one grieving, your holiness.”

They watched the cityfolk busying as ants below, shutting up markets, locking shops, avoiding the bodhiguard as best they could.

The bedfellow said, “Have you given some thought to how you’ll rule? You don’t seem the tyrannical type to me. Maybe softly-softly, huh.”

“I haven’t decided to accept yet.”

“Yes you have.” Wiping the vodka from his mouth the bedfellow stood again on cracking knees. “Well now, there’s a little spyle party in the Chemistry Faculty café. I wonder if Madeleine here might like to join.”

Madeleine span excitedly.

Leo said, “I think I’ll stay here a while. You go ahead.”

“Come on then, beautiful.” Madeleine took up the form of a cloak on the bedfellow’s back. Almost at the door, the bedfellow paused. “Your holiness, I’ve arranged your induction ceremony for eleven o’clock tomorrow. We’ll have some nice clothes delivered to your chambers. Oh,

and we'll get you some chambers too. Please try to scrub up a little. There was only ever one shabby dean and it was me."

"I haven't decided to accept yet," Leo said.

"Yes you have."

25.

Leo looked out beyond the window for anything that was him and saw nothing that was him.

Maybe a long time from now some of this world would get in through his ears, through his eyes, and he would become of this world, would speak its language, would enjoy its food. And then this world would not have changed one leaf, not one pebble, but a new Leo would sit in this Leo's place. Perhaps stronger, perhaps not.

Older, at least.

I am alone, he thought. *There is no one left in all of time and space who will love me without conditions. I must go into every battle as an army of one, if I choose to still fight.*

Everything is prickles and barbs. Or worse, no prickles and barbs, but grey. Unceasing, ever duller grey; living as a miraculous animal and feeling nothing; living as a king here perhaps, and feeling nothing. I was ugly before, but loved. Now I'm just ugly.

He looked to his mother's purple sunset.

If I stay on this world, every evening I will see that sunset and miss you. I will become a machine with the sole purpose of missing you.

He finished the vodka. He took the crumpled parchment from his pocket, put the ultraviolet lens to it—his mother's unmistakable handwriting still waiting there. His tears had wrecked the text, but he knew the spoiled words from memory.

Little Leo,

We're going to live on two sides of things now, I in the dark and you, my love, I hope, in the forever light. There are a thousand things I'd like to tell you, but two are far more important than the rest.

First, don't shy away from taking the stage, however bright the lights. The people of Gearheart will channel all their hopes for the future into you. They are tired of the ever-turning wheel of power. They are tired of the Devan Union's apathy, tired of Anaximander's promises that never materialised. And, I should imagine, they are already especially tired of Hisarya. They will embrace you as a kind dean, and you will be a kind dean. And, I believe, truly I do, that you will be the one to stop bivnik.

Also: Never buy cheap socks. Dance when you can. You'll know when you're in love. If you have to check, you're not.

Well then, that's the secret to ruling well. You'll work the rest out as you go.

To the second matter.

If I had dominion over all the atoms of all the worlds, I wouldn't go back and change the course of one, not by the slightest deviation, because you might not have been my son. And better all history's indignities stay unchanged and you remain my son than the other way around.

There will be years ahead now when you'll think you're lost and nothing can possibly recover you. You'll want for your mother and you'll know you can never talk to her again. You might rule ten thousand worlds by then, but I bet you'd trade it all for one more hug with me. And I'd give anything, anything in the galaxy, to live a little longer and watch you turn into the man you're about to. But that is not how things have gone.

Each life contains a few days of unimaginable fear and despair. You will think nothing can pull you out and back onto solid land. You'll be wrong though. You can, all by yourself. You have everything you need, right there in your clever head and bottomless heart. And even though we'll go separate ways now, and I'm afraid my hugs are off-limits, I will be right there at your side. For as long as you remember me, I'll attend your dark nights when your heart is broken and cheer from the cheap seats as your make your great ascendances. Then later, when your great-grandchildren have settled on distant worlds to raise their own little ones, and when those

little ones have grown old, when the stars have all winked out, when the whole galaxy has gone cold and everything has been snuffed to dust, there will still be two facts left behind in dead eternity: that I was your mother, and I loved you more than you can ever possibly understand.

I'm with you always and always,

Mama

VII

There is nothing worse than to remain sober around those who are drinking.

Their euphoria intensifies, while you only grow quietly embarrassed for them.

At some point during the evening they will intuit you are judging their follies and become self-conscious. They will despise you for depriving them of the bliss of drunken excess by virtue of your watching.

The reaction is much the same from the gluttonous, rich, and powerful when one reminds them that the resources of the environment are not infinite.

They might continue to plunder, but they will hate you for bringing conscience into their debauchery, for turning the light on during the orgy.

Why, the house was burning down, but we were so enjoying the glow. . .

- Excerpts from **The Empirical Sutras of Lady Ursula**

1.

For fifteen years had Dr Leo Tereshkov headed Gearheart University in quiet stewardship.

From above, the campus was an almost perfect circle.

The diameter sported lush fields of corn and farlafruit and barley, farmers sewing and tilling with spyles at their sides.

Inwards then, the suburbs—the initiate academics and administrative staff, the labourers and porters, all residing in modest wooden semi-detached houses.

In again, the middle class, admiring the purple evenings from balconies of soapstone, reclining on wicker chairs, sipping sour alcoholic beverages, and listening to classical music.

Now into the centre, where the streets were full of cows and bivniks and markets. Automated carts carried glittering machinery of erudite function, body parts for dissection, caravans of books stacked into pyramids—works of inscrutable abstraction on the height of time and the width of space.

In once more, through a gate of liquid glass.

Suddenly: quiet.

Negative acoustic generators were just one of the many technological fruits to bloom during Leo Tereshkov's reformation.

Down paths of ruffled titanium and glowing blue grass, past gardens where men and women in white togas stood for many hours arguing over rational matters, then deeper into the academic cloisters. Here were the many dormitories and communes where the scholars relaxed and drank and drew curtains across hammocks to stay up and make love until the small hours—the University Major, the nine central faculties: Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Philosophy, Literature, Engineering, Vexolology, and Bivnistics.

Centrally sat the Bivnik Clock. It measured not the passage of time, but how much time remained until complete bivnik collapse in the galaxy. The clock currently stood at four ninths bivnik on account of recent intelligence

claiming Bodhi was closer than ever to perfecting a working jhanamoksha recipe.

Above the clock soared Scholar's Tower. It was the shape of some idealised blade of grass, cast in various raggedly patched materials: iron, copper, titanium, newmetal, standing at least two hundred folk tall.

Entering the tower through the colossal crystalline arch, one was first greeted by the Great Hall, a chamber large enough to accommodate five hundred sitting folk. It was dusty and smelled of chalk, and many scholars could be found at all hours of the day standing over sandpits of sketched equations and shouting, *Oh, don't be so utopian!* Or, *You forgot the coefficient, dickwit!*

This style of argumentation was officially called "freedebate" but unofficially and most commonly, "pissing nonsense".

On the north wall was an interlocking set of several hundred plates. The plates could be moved about on rails, or removed and replaced entirely.

Onto the plates had been carved equations. These equations formed the *Bivnik Schema.*

The *Schema* was the cutting edge of all then-known mathematically about bivnik—an attempt to understand why civilisations inevitably gave in to runaway resource consumption, how fast the catastrophe was occurring, and—audaciously—if it might be stopped.

Many scholars sat before the *Schema* contemplating the nature of bivnik just as, many light-years away simultaneously, the initiates and oshos of La Geometrica Familia sat before towering stupas of burning incense, contemplating the nature of mind.

With a fluent eye for mathematics, one could discern three laws shining from the master plates of the *Schema*:

1. The resources of any environment, however plentiful, are limited.

2. The material needs of any technically competent civilisation, however noble, will eventually exceed the resources of its environment.

3. When those resources are depleted, the civilisation will experience total political and technological collapse.

Once a month or so, new additions to the *Schema* were proposed. If ninety percent of the high-scholars agreed, the updated equations were enshrined on a plate. A holy moment of silence ensued as Leo or Lepus begrudgingly accepted the honour of adding the new plate to the tableau. The academics would then flood out of the tower to the surrounding bars, most drunk long before midnight, briefly riding high on the notion that Gearheart was slightly closer to averting bivnistic disaster.

A single marble stairwell led to the Major Laboratories above. No other chamber on Gearheart inspired so much speculation. Many imagined it as a gilded sanctum of science where impossible technologies were designed and constructed, scholars floating from the ceiling and obliterating walls of granite with a thought.

In reality much of the space was taken up with workbenches for making overly elaborate coffee, and discussion cubbies where scholars huddled in sincere whispers and planned their projects for the day, or simply chattered idly about little matters.

The principal activity of these scholars was the retroengineering of Devan technology, and the effort had been progressing well. The molecular mechanics of newmetal were understood already for one thing. (It was not unlike steel but contained an extra fourspace particle discovered only recently, called a *vexon*.)

And above that still, via a sliding bookcase operable by voice command, were the chambers of the senior staff—home to Dr Leo Tereshkov and Dr Lepus, and whoever else happened to have enough alcohol to be permitted entrance also.

Officially, this was where the tough decisions were made.

Unofficially, not much happened inside but worry, drink, and more worry.

2.

Leo had a few beers back at his place to settle his nerves. Then he rode his bivnik through town to the arena.

The arena was a round newmetal thing on the edge of the campus.

The security folk recognised Leo and let him through the crowd. There was a box reserved for him way up top. Lepus was waiting in the box and already looked less than sober. They sat and drank and watched the arena fill up.

“What are we doing here?” Leo said.

“No existential questions before midnight, please,” Lepus said.

“I’ve got so much work. . .”

Lepus called a footman over. “The dean of Gearheart has so much work. Can you bring us a single malt?”

The footman did so. A few glasses in and the world was somewhat pleasant again.

A band played the Gearheart World Anthem and everyone stood. The announcer said something and Leo caught his own name and everyone looked into the box and clapped. Lepus grabbed Leo’s arm and waved it.

Next the fighters came out. There were two of them. They were both quite athletic, wearing breathers and helmets, and vexrigs on their backs.

Immediately the vexrigs struck Leo as bulky, overly cumbersome. He would suggest miniaturisation as a top priority for the next batch.

A gong sounded and the fighters circled each other.

“Did you bet?” Lepus asked.

“On the little one. You?” Leo said.

“Gambling is for degenerates.”

The big one ran and the little one vanished, stepped through Vex, then appeared behind the big one and delivered a blow to the head. The crowd cheered.

Someone knocked on the box and showed their papers. It was a journalist Leo recognised from one of the bigger news agencies. The footman let him in. The journalist sat behind Leo and said, “Dr Tereshkov, thank you so much for this opportunity. I won’t take up too much of your time.”

“It’s fine,” Leo said.

“Sir, you must be excited to see your work being used for recreation.”

“It’s the Vexolological Faculty’s work really, but I am very excited, yes.”

The big fighter vanished and appeared above the little fighter, falling on him like a rock. They wrestled about in the sand.

“Do you have some plans for new vexolological applications?”

“One or two,” Leo said.

“Such as, sir?”

“Next month we’re hoping to launch the first—”

Lepus poured his drink over Leo, said, “I think that’s the end of the interview.”

The journalist said, “But if Dr Tereshkov will just—”

“That’s the end of the interview.”

The journalist exited begrudgingly. Lepus said, “Are you feeling particularly stupid tonight, your holiness?”

“This is my last washed robe, hell damn it. . .”

“We keep the launch a secret until the thing has left the ground. Those were *your* instructions.” Lepus refilled their glasses. He poured his over himself. “There, we’re even.”

Down below, the little fighter zipped through Vex and appeared behind the big fighter, pinning his arms behind his head, wrestling him to the floor. The crowd roared in surprise.

Lepus said, “That’s twenty-five big ones down the drain. . .”

“I thought you said gambling is for degenerates.”

“Did I ever deny being a degenerate myself?”

The match was called. The little fighter had won. Leo had seventy praxis to his name.

He looked for the place in his mind where some sense of victory or *ah-ha*! should be and found nothing.

He looked for even the slightest of feeling and couldn’t find that either, not happiness, not sadness—only unbounded, unending beige.

He longed to be back in the garden of teenage torment, in those years when everything seemed horrible and, by comparison now, substantive—if only for having felt like anything at all.

Well, perhaps in another twenty years all of this awfulness—the weight of deanhood, of self-imposed sanity, of maintaining some semblance of

responsibility—would seem just as silly as his teenage worries seemed to him currently.

There was no way to know but live through it and reflect later.

Then reflect on that reflection.

Then die.

3.

Midnight, and Leo and Lepus found themselves at the Central Casino. The staff insisted the two of them sit at a reserved table in the back.

Players shuffled in, a sciencewoman Leo knew from somewhere or other and a few researchfolk. They sat opposite in silence and joined for a game of taogrum.

Leo did fine, winning three hands in the first ten runs. He started playing badly on purpose and won three more hands. “Are they letting me win?” he whispered to Lepus.

“Obviously. They don’t think they’ll get research funding otherwise.”

The researchman next to Leo left for a drink and the sciencewoman came over and took his chair. She was blonde with clever eyes and reminded him a little too much of Hisarya.

Lepus jabbed Leo in the ribs, gave him a wink, and announced he was going to get cigarettes.

The next hand began and the sciencewoman said, “I just wanted to tell you how much I admire your work.”

“That’s very kind, thank you,” Leo said. “You’re in the Physics Faculty?”

“Topologics.”

“Excellent.”

Another hand of taogrum. Leo ordered a gin and necked it.

The sciencewoman asked a lot of questions about the new dimensional equation revisions and Leo answered as best he could. He looked around for Lepus.

The sciencewoman said, “I hope this doesn’t sound too forward, but I’d really like to discuss fourspace matters in private if you have some free time.”

“Ah, possibly.”

“What are you doing after the casino?”

“Dr Lepus and I will probably get something to eat, I think.” There was a pause in which Leo assumed he should add an invitation and said nothing. He politely excused himself.

He found Lepus wandering idly in the lobby and they moved to the casino’s diner. Lepus lit a cigarette. “You can’t smoke in here,” Leo said.

“You’re the dean of Gearheart, your holiness. If you say I can smoke in here, I can smoke in here.”

“Well then, I didn’t say you could smoke in here.”

Lepus pushed the cigarettes across. Leo lit up. Soon everyone in the restaurant was smoking and the staff watched uncertainly.

“About the vexboat prototype—” Leo began.

“Not tonight, not when we’re supposed to be having fun.”

Leo sketched a little imitation of the vessel on the back of a napkin, added the fins and propellers, then the dimensional window. “Look, what if we can’t angle the entry into fourspace properly? The machine will get sliced in half as it moves into Vex.”

“Not tonight. . .”

“This is serious. People are going to die if we don’t get it right.”

“Mm. . .”

“How did you do it? How did Devas push large objects into fourspace properly without cutting them in half?”

“I wouldn’t know. . .”

“*Damn it*,” Leo hit the table. “Damn it,” he repeated quieter, almost polite. “If we kill someone, the public will turn against the project. If the public turn against the project, we’ll never build a working vexboat. If we never build a working vexboat, we have nothing to stand up to Hisarya with. And if that happens, we may as well just give into bivnik now.”

Lepus executed the customary eye roll and sigh. “I don’t remember how we did it. I just don’t. It was intuitive, like walking or sleeping. We lived in

Vex; it was self-evident. We felt it."

"Well, our prototype can't do any *feeling*—it's metal."

Lepus made an apathetic noise and ordered a round of tequila.

4.

Several hours later Leo woke to a knock at his door. It was the sciencewoman from the casino.

"I'm sorry, but Dr Lepus gave me your address."

"I see."

"Would now be a good time to talk fourspace vectors?"

"I have a very early start tomorrow, I'm afraid."

She was already inside. "I'll be quick."

He mixed them both a lime and gin and they stared out the window. It was a fine view, Scholar's Tower lit up blue with magnesium lamps. Behind that, behind the crowded muddle of the faculties, Quaternion Mountain was all white with the glare of the moons.

"Are you Bodhi emigrated or Gearheart native?" Leo asked to fill the silence.

"Gearheart. By the time I decided on science, well, you'd already brought your reformation along. It was the perfect time to enrol at the university."

Your reformation. He wanted to shake that right off like a chill. He said, "You mentioned you had fourspace vector questions?"

"I'm sure you already know about the rumours. . ."

"I don't."

"About a prototype vexboat?"

"It's not something I can talk about."

She put her glass down against his. "Only, if it were something in the works. . .well, I'd love to be a part of it. I graduated with sixes in bivnistics, non-linear gaugeworks, apeiron—"

“That’s great, a high accomplishment, really, but I don’t know if the university is looking for more engineering staff at the moment. You’d have to contact administration.”

“If vexboats did exist, that would mean big things for Gearheart, I think. We’d finally be a force to reckon with.”

“It’s not something I can talk about.”

“Trade, transport, exploration, no limit. Imagine it, Gearheartians flying out to the stars all by themselves. Why, you’d have an empire of your own, wouldn’t you?”

No, Leo thought. *Anything but that.* He said, “Listen, I’m really quite tired, why don’t we call it an evening?”

“It’s an awfully long way back to my apartment.”

“I’ll cover the carriage fare.”

“Well, what if I’d quite like to stay with you tonight?”

A warm, upcoming draft passed through him, the prospect he was wanted for himself, that his hideous face and asymmetry and blundering, stupid countenance could be overlooked, could be forgiven. That maybe, impossibly, she saw a glimmer of something un-ugly in him.

Just for a moment he had permission to exist.

“Well,” he said, trying not to stutter. “If you’d like to stay, then yes.”

“Dr Lepus paid me for the whole evening anyway.”

Leo tried to keep his face neutral. “I thought you said you worked in topologics at the Physics Faculty.”

“I moonlight as a few things. Scholar wages aren’t fantastic.”

“I see. Well, no, thank you. Let’s not do that.”

5.

He chatted to the sciencewoman a while until she fell asleep on the sofa. He covered her in a blanket, then fetched the champagne from the fridge. He necked a glass, necked another.

He looked at himself in the mirror for a while, his eyes now developing crow’s feet with age, his teeth crooked: the decline.

He took the champagne bottle down onto the street. A man was lying in the road. Leo sat down beside him and offered the champagne and they shared it a while in silence.

The bivnik clock chimed in the distance.

The man said, “The end is coming, you know.”

“I know,” Leo said.

“Everything will have been for nothing.”

“I know.”

“Do I recognise you?”

“No.”

They finished the bottle and Leo went to the 28-hour shop and brought back a pack of beer and they finished that too.

A party spilled out of the bar opposite, laughing and kissing.

The man threw up in the road and wiped his mouth. He said, “How do they carry on? Don’t they know it’s for nothing?”

“They know,” Leo said.

“You look familiar.”

“I’m not. Do you have a family?”

“Sure.”

“You should see them more. Bodhi could spring a surprise attack anytime.”

“Doesn’t matter anyhow,” the man said.

“No, it doesn’t.”

6.

Morning and a hangover like death.

Leo was supposed to be inducting the new bivnik mechanics students for the year. He walked the mile or so to the Bivnistics Faculty and began to feel slightly more human.

The students were already waiting in the lecture theatre, their spyles floating silently at their sides.

He opened by telling the students that bivnik mechanics was no joke, though they might be mocked for their choice of subject by parents and friends of a more *non-theoretical* persuasion. He told them it was possible they would be accused of regressionism, of falsely trying to scare folk with prognostication of the end times.

"But," he said, "for those of you coming into this course from subjects less confined by fusty old shackles like *rationality* or *proof*, and I'm talking mainly to the psychology students here," —pause for laughter. No laughter — "you'll already be aware of the importance of theoretics. We'll take it as a given that you also know the basic principles of the bivnik effect. Can anyone sum them up for me?"

Blank stares.

Leo pointed to himself, "All right, Dr Tereshkov, any ideas? Yes, Dr Tereshkov, please go on. Well, in a closed system containing a technological civilisation, resource use will always exponentially accelerate to maximum."

He wrote the symbol for bivnik on the blackboard, originally the Devan glyph for *perpetual progress*. That had been Lepus' suggestion.

He added in the metric tensor and the Devan glyph for limited resources. He said, "By *bivnik* we mean the *drive to proliferate*—the will to expand, inherent in native and Devan culture, and all biology actually. It is an absolute. Life survives by proliferation. But." He pointed to the *limited resources* glyph. "It doesn't matter how abundant the resources are that this symbol represents, it doesn't matter how wide the containing space is—given enough time, a civilisation will continue improving and expanding to the point that all available resources are consumed."

He went silent for effect. He surveyed the young eyes. Were they confused or just apathetic? Probably many of the students had only taken the course to say the dean had taught them for a few months. They must be regretting their decision already, knowing at that very moment their friends were learning how to build vexrigs and negative acoustic generators.

He wrote another symbol on the blackboard. "This is the third and final variable of the bivnik equation. What does it represent, please?" Silence. "Did *anyone* read the pre-course material?"

A girl with knotted dark hair put up her hand. Leo nodded.

The girl said, "It's the technological modifier."

Thank the gods. . . “Please go on.”

The girl fixed her stare on the ground. “The speed at which progress consumes resources is governed by the rate of technological acceleration within a civilisation.” She was recalling directly from the *Bivnik Methodologies* textbook, Leo knew. He and Lepus had written it after all.

Leo fetched a chocolate from his desk and tossed it to the girl. “Please accept some diabetes. What’s your name?”

“Marta, sir.”

“You’re absolutely right, Marta Sir. For extra points, are there any variables that can halt bivnik?”

The question was a half-joke—there was no official answer, but Marta didn’t pause. “Moderation,” she said quietly.

Maybe she isn’t so smart after all. “Really?” Leo said sceptically.

The girl’s shy glances were gone; her eyes widened and Leo recognised this sudden confidence, recognised his inner-child in this almost-adult.

Marta said, “Civilisations could train themselves to moderate.”

The pretence of student-teacher impartiality evaporated immediately in Leo. He said, “Over thousands of years, how could a civilisation possibly hope to hold itself in check? One hundred thousand years, a million—bivnik must always increase to maximum.”

“And powered flight will never work,” Marta said. “And travel between planets it impossible. And we’ll never understand how the sun comes up in the morning.”

Leo muttered, “An optimist, eh?”

The girl drew her hands into her sleeves and said nothing.

It occurred to Leo suddenly that he himself had been young once, that his skin had been smooth and his outlook all sunshine.

The world had presented as a set of interesting facts rather than some great metal collar about his neck.

Come back, he said to his childhood self. *Where are you? Did I kill you? I still feel you near sometimes, or catch you falling out of me. I still like dessert. I still dream of Mama. But I feel so old now and you are so far away and hell, the world is pointless.*

He made a quick effort to memorise Marta’s face and turned back to the blackboard.

To the class he said, “Will you kindly learn the primary bivnik equations for next week?”

To the boy inside himself he said, *The world is too heavy. Help.*

7.

Leo wore Madeleine as a cape and rode his bivnik over to the Engineering Faculty.

He took the stairs down through the metallurgy halls, past the armed guards, and into the Technical Basement.

The vexboat prototype was the shape of a bulbous almond, all white, and sat in a sea of discarded parts and cabling.

Lepus and the chief designer were waiting inside the machine.

The designer began a tour of the craft. It was true to Leo and Lepus’ specifications. The windows were titaniumplastic. The crystal circuitry was as simple as possible. The hull was coated in newmetal so as to keep the craft in threespace, even as it was passing through Vex. There were only two seats: one for the pilot, one for the navigator.

“You’ve done wonderfully,” Leo said and shook the designer’s hand. “When do you think we can start test flights?”

“Six months at best, sir,” the designer said. “The onboard vexrig is still causing us problems. We’re yet to solve the dimensional window issue.”

As if I’m not aware of that, Leo thought. He said, “Do you think a manned test will be possible by next month if we bring in more staff?”

The designer laughed. Then, noticing Leo was serious: “Sir, not without solving the window problem. We need a great deal more time.”

Leo saw Bodhi in his mind’s eye—oshos and monsters, bloodied, readying for war, screaming for death; Hisarya at the head of the pohod, pointing with a thin and pale finger to their destination: Gearheart.

“There is no more time,” Leo said.

The designer curled his lip, nodded.

The designer and the engineering folk left for their respective offices. Only Leo and Lepus remained in the basement. They sat on the floor and smoked and marvelled up at the vexboat.

Leo said, “I met a strange one today, new student. She tried to sell me on *moderation*.”

“She’s been hanging out with the maniacs at the freedebate gardens. Give her a year, she’ll come around.”

Leo sucked on his hipflask and passed it over. He said, “She’s not wrong to dream though. It’s been over a decade and we still haven’t got anything new.”

Lepus nodded to the vexboat. “No, your holiness. We have *this*.”

The flask finished, they stubbed out their cigarettes and stood.

Leo said, “I should be on the first flight.”

“Or take the second and actually stay alive.”

“You’ve made the whole of Gearheart think I’m some stupid king. It’s no use if I go to parties, but never into battle. I should be on the first flight.”

Lepus rolled his eyes. “If you refrain from risking your life, then we can build a working vexboat, and later an entire navy, all for you to play with. Or, end up dead on a test run, and the world loses at least what it thinks is a monarch. You don’t have kids, no heirs. Gearheart will go to the dogs.”

Leo said, “Maybe you’ll become dean again. That’ll be nice. Responsibility is your favourite.”

“You’re not taking the first flight.”

8.

What a time those early days had been, when the university reopened—fifteen long years ago.

Leo took the administrative helm officially, though always with Lepus standing close by, providing guiding words when needed, and insults otherwise.

How the Gearheart folk had turned on the bodhiguard and beaten them with their own matterspears.

How the bodhiguard had gone running to the vexmule, and the vexmule only collapsed of exhaustion with so many folk huddled inside the carriage.

Those were the golden days of potential, with everything possible and nothing set in writing.

Leo and Lepus rehired the exiled academics. They created new faculties.

They burned the old constitution. They wrote manifestos.

They modified the ancient aegis barrier around the city until it was twice as resilient as that which surrounded Bodhi.

They were drunk every day, and every day they woke with little memory to discover whatever new thing they had done the night before. Usually it was funny enough to pass off as a joke—a horse appointed to the Gearhart Reformation Commission or some such.

Other mornings they woke to find they had solved a mathematical conundrum in their drunkenness, though without writing down their working, and skulked about for hours hungover, trying different approaches and only coming up stupid.

After work Leo usually walked out to the fields to sit and drink and watch the stars as Johannes once had.

Somewhere amid the Dramaic constellation was Sola. Somewhere around Sola was Earth. And somewhere on Earth, probably, was Hisarya.

“How can we possibly stand up to her?” Leo asked Lepus one night.

“Your holiness, build an empire, then we’ll talk.”

9.

Leo’s bivnik mechanics class again.

He made a point to come sober, and from his seat at the front he watched the students shuffle in. Knotty-haired Marta entered and took a bench at the back, nervously eyeing her classmates.

Chatter to hush to silence, the performance began.

Leo said, “For those of you who were awake during our last session together, you may recall we learned that the laws underlying a civilisation’s

behaviour are just as reliable and universal as those underlying matter's behaviour. The sciencefolk of old would have been quite surprised to hear that their own society was just as subject to mathematical deconstruction as the rivers and stars."

He unveiled the bivniscope. It stood tall on three metal legs. The mechanism itself was built from rivets of steel, a shining and bulbous affair—a handle at the side to orient and an eyepiece with modifiable lenses. Below the eyepiece were many dials sporting mathematical symbols. Instantly recognisable were the bivnik signifiers for *ample resources* and *scarce resources.*

Leo pointed the bivniscope to the Meta-cluster, the centre of the Devan Union. He said, "Several Devas knew full well of the coming of bivnik. They built devices such as this to track its progression."

He found no reason to name his mother personally; it would've seemed grandiose.

He said, "Moksha in its consumable form is a flower, but the base ingredient is stoyanium-32. Stoyanium can only be obtained by collecting and distilling energetic emanations from phi-type stars. As you might imagine, each time a Devan settlement moves in on a new phi-star solar system, the first thing they do is get to work on collecting the star's stoyanium and sending it back to one of the refinery worlds. As stoyanium is extracted, the star begins to age at a far more rapid pace than its otherwise natural lifecycle. This accelerated change shows up in the spectral lines of a star. Tracking that change isn't a terrible way of measuring the rate at which the Devas are sucking the blood out of the galaxy. We are also lucky enough to be able to see these spectral lines even during daylight."

He beckoned. The students shuffled down through their seats and formed a line to the bivniscope, all murmuring, all spots and perfume.

They peered through the lens and made little sense of what they saw: the stars of the Meta-cluster shining purple and orange and yellow.

Leo said, "You might be wondering, well, if starlight takes hundreds of years to reach us, how can we see changes so recent in the bivniscope? Those of you familiar with geometry will know that, yes, in threespace, light is extremely slow. In fourspace however, radiation travels sometimes fifty times as quickly. The spectral lines you're looking at are, at most,

decades old. Now, those purple stars are still sporting enough stoyanium to shine a while longer. Those towards the orange and yellow hues are close to death, however."

It was Marta's turn at the bivniscope. She adjusted the dials and squinted through the lens. Leo said, "What do you think?"

Quietly she said, "It's very sad."

"What is?"

"We only have five hundred years."

"Officially it's a thousand. . ." Leo said.

"With Bodhi's rate of progression—"

"All right," Leo said, forgetting his impartiality with her once again. "But they won't reach exponential expansion for a while yet."

Marta said, "Yes, but I thought to include Gearheart. Our opposition to Bodhi is only accelerating their rate of technological improvement towards jhanamoksha." Wistfully: "It's ironic that the best way to slow bivnik would be to wipe *ourselves* out."

"Very astute. . ." Leo muttered. He knew her point was valid, and that it had no decent counter. With grim horror then he revisited the axioms he tried to keep buried in his lowmind.

Bodhi's progress will accelerate to meet ours, and vice versa. Even if we one day destroy Bodhi, Gearheart will only take its place. We'll become the new ambitious empire, spreading out as Hisarya does now. Brave new worlds, brave new bombs, brave new all-you-can-eat diners and all-you-can-conquer moons.

He re-veiled the bivniscope and distributed the students' course books. The class checked their marks, grumbled or whooped. He dismissed them for the day.

Marta remained. She shuffled down to Leo's desk and, from behind messy curls, said quietly, "You wrote that I should see you after class, sir."

"I did. You're not in trouble. Marta, how old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"You know we don't accept undergraduates younger than eighteen?"

"I know, sir."

He spied her hand tremble slightly. She forced it into her pocket. “I had a little look through the student register. I couldn’t find a record of induction for anyone called Marta this year. Is it a nickname maybe?” She closed her eyes, shook her head.

Leo said again, slower, “Marta, how old are you?”

She pushed a knot of hair behind her ear. In a shamed whisper: “Sixteen.”

“May I ask what you’re doing at Gearhart University lectures?”

She only muttered goodbye and raced out the door.

10.

Marta did not attend class the next day or the next. Leo asked after her among the students and no one was much help.

He continued on into bivnik tensor transformations and met only bored eyes. He decided on setting the class simple equation balancing problems, then sneaking out onto the balcony to take nips of whisky from his hipflask.

After class he dropped in at the university admissions office and asked about rejected applications. He found it easily enough: *Marta Kuneva*. She’d stated that her age was eighteen on the form and applied exclusively for the undergraduate course in bivnik mechanics. The application was returned to her: BIRTHDATE DOCUMENTS REQUIRED TO PROCESS INDUCTION.

She had not taken the application further.

The form sported an address, a shanty street in Cyan.

Leo closed his office for the day and caught the overland train out to the suburbs, past the gleaming white houses where the distinguished academics lived, past the service worker district, all bungalows and bars, and finally through the outer suburbs.

The houses were closer to shacks; boards of wood arranged higgledy across each other, everything in disrepair.

The train passed through the Disaster Projects. Leo attempted not to look out the window, but couldn’t help himself. Folk were stumbling about

with limbs degrading and limbs missing; purple blotches on their heads and chests and legs—the *buboes.*

It had started innocently enough, an attempt to cure seasonal flu. Some up-and-coming university biologist not five years ago tried to synthesise a cure in Vex, thinking that adding an extra spatial dimension might lend some new molecular property to the antidote.

The result had been a hyper-potent strain of the virus that was impervious to treatment.

The researcher gave the infection to her husband. Her husband gave it to their children. Their children gave it to the city.

Over three hundred dead and several thousand consigned to live in the Disaster Projects, rarely spoken of, rarely apologised to.

A bout of drinking had kept the thing from Leo's mind a few months. More drinking kept it at bay after that.

He got off the train in Cyan and no one seemed to recognise him. He walked a few blocks to the shanty enclave—a single, lone street, most of the houses just ruins.

Marta's alleged house was a squat mess of wood. Leo knocked. No answer.

He peered in through the window. No one was inside.

An old woman put her head over the garden fence. She volunteered that Marta did indeed live there, *a polite girl,* both her parents killed in the reformation violence.

Leo thanked her for the information and took a walk down the street.

He imagined these wrecks of houses before the reformation, before *his* reformation—suburban homes for the raising of children, for the taking of afternoon tea in the garden.

What a thing it would be to live like that, he thought. *All quiet and middled.*

To have a child, a spouse. To worship one's family as a shrine. To live for routine and purpose. To allocate a special drawer for napkins, and come home at the end of the day to someone who cared about your day. To lay your head on a pillow at night and not see empty space or the particulars of approaching civilisational death, but rather go down into the coddling dark

of sleep for eight hours next to a true lover, then wake refreshed and wander off into the new, mild morning where everything is light and possible.

To walk about in the world among the peoples of the world and, just for a day, just for an hour, not avoid eye contact with folk on the street for fear they look on one's face as it is; debased and disgusting, crow-footed, alcoholic, the most vile spectacle of bastard geometry.

To feel like a person. Just once.

He bought some writing materials from a corner shop. He returned to Marta's house, scrawled a note, and left it on the porch.

Miss Kuneva,

It is my great pleasure to inform you that your application to attend Gearheart University has been accepted, wherein you will study for an undergraduate degree in Bivnik Mechanics. *The matter of your age need not be an issue. I have also seen to it that a room is prepared at the Bivnistics dormitory building should you wish to live there for the duration of your studies, free of charge. You will be expected to begin attending lectures at your earliest convenience.*

Yours sincerely,

Dr Leo Tereshkov

11.

The crisisbell woke Leo. On instinct he ran with Madeleine to the aegis barrier on the boundary of the campus. Just beyond the aegis stood a huge, watchful owl.

The owl said, "My name is High Priestess Theodora of the Devan Union. May I assume you are Leo Tereshkov?"

"Possibly."

Lepus joined Leo's side dressed only in pyjama bottoms. "Teddie," he said. "You don't look a day over two thousand."

Theodora said, “Lord rabbit, you’re a native now, I see. Was it trifurcation? If so, where are your two counterparts?”

“Sunning themselves on the bliss moons. They didn’t have the temperament for academia. What are you doing here? Finally come to tell me I was right all along?”

“In a sense. Might I have a private word with you both?”

Leo said, “What do you want?”

Theodora smiled diplomatically. “I have come several hundred light-years. Might we talk in the privacy of a chamber?”

Leo whispered into Lepus’ ear, “A Bodhi trick?”

“Maybe, but it’s definitely Teddie.”

“How can you tell?”

Lepus winked. “Let’s say we knew each other rather well some centuries ago. Plus, she hasn’t come with guards; that’s fairly strange. I say we let her inside.”

“You know what Ayakashi did to Old Bodhi. This one’s on your head.”

“Done.”

Leo hand-gestured to Madeleine, *Darling, please go and tell the Engineering Faculty to get the campus bomb cooking. If Lepus or I call for it, blow the thing without question, all right?*

Madeleine span in the affirmative.

12.

They led Theodora through streets of pensive, watching Gearheartians, many of the younger folk seeing a Deva for the first time. The three of them made finally to Leo’s office in Scholar’s Tower, the city sprawling below.

Leo said, “Sorry, there isn’t a chair that will suit you. I don’t have owls in here much.”

“I’ll stand, thank you,” Theodora said.

Lepus poured them all a vodka. Theodora exhibited some difficulty gripping the glass with her wings, and opted to just plunge her beak in.

Lepus said, “What’s this all about, Teddie?”

Theodora collected herself. “The Golden Council elections are a month from now. I am. . . *less than popular* of late. It is widely accepted that I won’t be winning a third term.”

Leo muttered, “We don’t do careers guidance here.”

“Perhaps you know that politics was never my first choice, Dr Tereshkov. I am a poet by training and temperament.”

“I really couldn’t care less. Just tell us what this is about and be on your way, please. You’re the first Deva to pass through the aegis barrier in recent years, and the public is probably concerned.”

Theodora nibbled a wing, sank onto her bottom. The pomp and self-regard seemed to evaporate from her face. “The Golden Council is mostly headless now, convinced Bodhi is coming for them. Many of the council members are likely about to defect to Bodhi’s cause, following the scent of moksha. They know I am not sympathetic to Bodhi, and will no doubt eject me.”

“Who will take over your reign?” Lepus said.

“There are a few candidates, most of them secretly faithful to your sister’s cause, Dr Tereshkov. Or, sufficiently scared of her to act in such a manner anyway. Probably the entire Union will begin fracturing soon. It’s been building for years anyway.”

“How unfortunate,” Leo said flatly.

Lepus poured them all another shot and they drank.

Theodora said from behind a low, shamed brow, “I have come to ask for your assistance.”

“*Our* assistance?” Leo said with a disbelieving smirk. “You haven’t responded to a single one of our pleas for protection. We’ve fought off Bodhi ourselves all this time.”

“For that I am sorry.”

“You’re not the least bit sorry. The only thing you and the council have cared about for the last I-don’t-know-how-long is moksha. Now Mriga’s sitting on the biggest supply there is and all you can do is let him expand Bodhi’s empire.”

“I am only asking for a little consideration. . .”

“Consideration?” Leo said, almost yelling. “Where was this *consideration* when my mother asked for help? Where was this

consideration when they chained my father up and kept him in a cell for the rest of his miserable life? Where was this consideration when they both threw themselves to their deaths?”

Theodora bowed her head and flopped her wings. In a little voice she said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all of it. Leo—”

“Dr Tereshkov.”

“Dr Tereshkov. Please understand that I did my best to endear the council to your mother’s plight. If you ever want to check the council minutes, they are available in the archives on Phoebe.”

“Oh, the minutes. . .”

Theodora closed her eyes and said in an agonised voice, “I offered to take your mother with me when I left for Phoebe, but she chose to stay on Earth. As soon as I arrived back at the council chambers I tried to send a rescue party. I was blocked every time by the council elders. There was nothing I could do, nothing. . .” She opened her wings. “I haven’t just come here for your help. I’ve come for your forgiveness.”

Leo glanced at Lepus. Lepus shrugged.

Sensing the rare opportunity to actually see inside the Meta-cluster, Leo said, “Do the Union council members believe in the bivnik effect?”

“Many, yes.”

“Why aren’t they listening to us?”

“Because you are not the first to discover that change is slow. Your mother presented her bivnik idea to the council centuries ago. No one questioned her mathematics.”

“*My* mathematics,” Lepus muttered.

Theodora continued, “It was decided that limiting the Union’s growth because of bivnik was *anti-Devan*, tantamount to a condemnation of our nature. Instead, we would innovate our way out via some technology yet to be discovered.”

“Fantastic,” Leo said. “Give Hisarya a few more years to perfect the jhanamoksha molecule and she’ll show you just what a great plan that was. Is this all you’ve come to say?”

“No, Dr Tereshkov. I bring a gift of sorts.” Theodora awkwardly poured herself a vodka, almost dropping the bottle in her wings. “Several decades ago a Union legion encountered a gamma pulse in interstellar space. It was

regular, clearly a signal of some kind. Just a month ago a second, similar pulse was detected seven light-years beyond the Meta-cluster, near Yll."

"Where are the signals coming from?"

"We're not sure.

"Can't you trace them?"

"No, they are coordinates in Vex, not Samsara. They require an extra-dimensional axis to triangulate. We haven't been able to locate the third or fourth pulses yet, which we would need to pinpoint the origin. But wherever the signals are coming from, it's outside Union territory, further than anyone has ever, or could ever, travel via moksha."

Leo said sardonically, "And you know about our vexboat project, of course."

"The rumours, certainly."

"And you think a vexboat could reach the signal's source."

"Yes."

Leo muttered under his breath.

"What's in the signal?" Lepus said.

"Staritae," Theodora said. "It's the same word over and over." She said something in vexspeech, the sound echoing all about them.

"The hell is that?" Leo said.

"*Maitreya*," Lepus murmured. "The Bodhi word is *Maitreya*. The second coming."

Leo looked pensively from Lepus to Theodora and back again, as though waiting for permission to take the thing seriously. When no one spoke, he said, "For a moment there I thought you'd come to ask for clemency. Instead you want to use our technology for one of your religious projects? I'll have to decline. We've survived fine without you the last decade. We'll survive fine the next few."

Beak beginning to go lax with drink, eyes tired, Theodora said, "The signal is only one facet of this. It could be an elaborate fake. We can't confirm it really is originating from beyond the travel-barrier until we locate another pulse, if there is one. If you were willing to help. . ."

"No thanks. If there's nothing else, the door's over there."

Theodora said softly, “Dr Tereshkov, many worlds inside the Meta-cluster are waking up to Gearheart’s cause. They are terrified of the Bodhi Empire, terrified of a life without fourspace. With some persuading, though, they will leave the Union and swear allegiance to you and your new Vex technologies.”

“What?” Leo said, *Maitreya* still echoing through his mind.

“You come from a family of radicals. Your sister staged a revolution. Maybe now it is your turn to stage one against her, beyond Gearheart this time. Devas are not mystics. We take these animal forms and wear these robes to remain in the service of something. We cannot bear the thought that we’ve achieved everything technologically and spiritually, and now have to endure this grey, stagnant condition. We live as gods in the hope that salvation exists. If you deliver the Union worlds something better than a vague promise of transcendence, if you deliver them technology, they will come with you instead. Show them sense. Show them that if they join with Gearheart’s cause, there may still be some hope of turning the tide of bivnik before it is too late. Show them how the walls of paradise are crumbling. When the barrier to the right course of action is low enough, most folk *will* do the right thing.”

“Sure,” Leo muttered. “How about you bring me my parents’ ashes first and then we talk.”

“That is outside my control.”

“Then I’m afraid we have zero interest in using technology we may or may not have developed to go on some religious pilgrimage for you to the edge of the galaxy.”

Theodora nodded. “All right.” She turned to Lepus. “But there’s no doubt on my mind that the signals lead to Annica.”

“The thought had crossed my mind. . .” Lepus said.

“Annica?” Leo said.

Lepus rolled his eyes. “An old myth. Allegedly Anaximander left a cache of holy technology or something waiting at the edge of the galaxy, in case of a coming crisis.”

“Are we *not* in a crisis?” Theodora said. “What if the signals started transmitting for just such an occasion as the one we’re in now?”

Trying not to betray interest in his voice, Leo said, “What kind of holy technology are we talking about?”

“The final theoretics,” Theodora said. “The base tools of reality. Exactly what I believe you have been looking for, Dr Tereshkov.”

Leo thought. *The meta-yes. The floorboards of everything.* His breath shortened. His heart jumped to double-time.

He saw himself and Hisarya floating in the Vex lake, their smiles so wide their faces looked as though they’d break. Carefully he said, “What proof is there of this *Annica*?”

Lepus said, “Not much more than a myth. It’s mentioned a few times in the appendices of the gospel.”

“But you knew Anaximander didn’t you, both of you? Surely he mentioned it.”

Theodora and Lepus exchanged a glance.

Lepus raised the vodka bottle. “It is the morning after, and we have forgotten most of the edifications of the night before, your holiness.”

“What?”

Theodora said, “We think it’s a memory degradation problem. None of us remember much past a thousand years back. Moksha granted us Vex, but we never changed our underlying neurology. Brains aren’t designed to hold so much time.”

“Brilliant,” Leo said. *Then Mama didn’t remember Anaximander either,* he thought. *It was all just stories.* “But you claim to know the first two coordinates for this place?”

Theodora nodded. “I will give them to you in full, to the people of Gearheart.”

Lepus said, “That’s very kind and all Teddie, but you weren’t ever exactly one for charity. What is it you want in exchange?”

“Political asylum. If Bodhi sympathies increase, I don’t have long. Besides, I’ve made too much noise about bivnik on the Golden Council already. The broken Union councillors will send assassins after me as soon as I’m out of office, I’ve no doubt of it.” Tipsily she prostrated on the floor before them, her beak almost kissing the rug. “I will withdraw from moksha and become a native. I will take any position you offer me, lowly or

otherwise. I will gift you the coordinates we know so far for Annica. I ask only that you let me become a Gearheart citizen."

Leo felt that now familiar uncertainty cloud over his spirit; the sad reaffirmation that whatever he did in a crisis, it would never be the right decision. He thought of Hisarya, thought of how strange it was that for all her evils and warped righteousness, she too must be facing the same impossible decisions at that exact same moment, bearing the same impossible weight of rule upon her breaking back.

He said, "You may have asylum here, but there are conditions."

"Name them, please."

"I don't trust you. After what you did to my mother, I never will. You say it was beyond your control to help her, but it could just as well have been apathy, or some Union plot all along. I don't know what schemes are hiding in your head."

"What can I do to gain your trust?"

"Have yourself trifurcated like Lepus. One *and only one* of your divided selves may come to live with us here. It's the only way I can think of to ensure Gearheart's safety."

"But it will mean murder for two-thirds of me. . ."

Lepus said, "That does seem a little harsh."

Leo snapped, "You were clearly sleeping with her. Your opinion is fucking forfeit."

"Yeah, fair enough."

Leo continued, "Send your two trifurcated selves away to the bliss moons with Lepus' other two selves, a little boy and a kind woman. They'll be good company. Or have them run off to one of the separatist worlds; it doesn't matter. But there's no way in hell I'm having you here as a Deva. Trifurcate yourself, then you'll have your asylum. We can arrange a scholar's position here for you at the university. I'll make sure you're treated fairly."

Theodora looked up as though checking to see if Leo could be persuaded otherwise. His face did not waver. She said, "Then that is what I will do."

"Fine." Leo said. Into her ear he added quietly, "And whatever happens, however helpful and good you are, however penitent and kind, I will never,

never forgive you.”

13.

Marta attended the next bivnik mechanics lecture, homework finished. Then she attended the next, and the next after that.

As the course drew on and the mathematics became harder, students began to drop out until only three remained: Marta, a Bodhi refugee girl, and a boy from the high-scholar suburbs.

Leo binned his notes and filled the board with distances and vectors.

“You all know the foundational equations now, and the two possible outcomes of maximum bivnik: regression or extinction. Today we’re going to look into new theoretical approaches—anything at all, mathematically speaking. I want whatever you’ve got.”

The Bodhi girl said, “Intergalactic travel, escaping to another galaxy?”

“Mm,” Leo murmured. “As it stands other galaxies are far, far too distant to travel to, even for Devas. Anything else?”

“Escape into Vex,” the suburbs boy said.

“How so?”

“Maybe we could build threespace habitats in fourspace, continue civilisation that way.”

“Just because you add an extra spatial dimension doesn’t mean more resources,” Leo said not-gently. “Bivnik will still approach maximum.”

“Reformation,” Marta said quietly.

Leo tried not to look sceptical. “Go on.”

“Well, why do the bivnik equations have to be deterministic? It’s like calculating the parabola of a man jumping off a ledge. The mathematics work fine, but he could always just choose not to jump.”

The idea had been so hotly debated and so thoroughly debunked that Leo could barely find the energy for a polite dismissal. He said, “We’re working on a timescale of millennia here. Even if a society reformed for a few thousand years and found a way to exist without expansion, it would

still eventually develop jhanamoksha, or some other galaxy-ending technology. We've discussed this."

"You're forgetting about wisdom, sir."

He resisted a groan. "Am I?"

"Don't some societies grow wiser over time?"

"You show me the mathematical symbol for wisdom and then we'll discuss it."

He put the thing out of his mind, but it returned in the shower that evening, and again in the night.

He had the terrible sense that if a system of describing the world such as mathematics became sufficiently powerful, the mathematicians themselves would grow convinced there was nothing beyond its scope—not unlike a blind man discounting *yellow* because he could neither touch nor smell it.

14.

No runway was required for the vexboat prototype's flight into Vex, so the launch was to take place in the basement where it had been built.

Leo came sober, then retreated to the toilet in a moment of panic and necked a half of vodka. He returned to a small crowd of engineers and designfolk. Lepus was briefing the pilot and the navigator in technical-speak.

Leo said, "I'll be joining the crew."

Lepus said, "Ignore the dean; he's understandably skittish today."

"I will be joining the crew. If it's possible, please fit the prototype with one more chair."

Lepus said, "Excuse me, your holiness, but have you finally had your big mid-thirties stroke?"

The designfolk glanced between the two men uncertainly. Leo pulled rank and insisted they did as he asked. To Lepus' continued protestations, a third chair was fitted inside the vexboat.

Leo inspected the prototype, paying special attention to the vexrig apparatus. Its design had been too complicated for redundancies. If it failed

mid-flight, there would be no getting home.

He had in his back pocket a scrap of paper sporting the first-ever dimensional Vex equation, the septernion: non-time dependent, non-commutative, simple and stupid compared to today's formulations. Still, he and Lepus had worked at least three years on the thing to make it work, finding the fifth and final variable one morning around sunrise, then taking to the rooftop to open a bottle of Bodhi whisky and whoop and yell and hug each other. Now this strange craft would ride atop those abstractions.

The controls and mechanisms were checked by all present, twice, thrice, four times.

The rudders were oriented; the air tanks pressurised.

Leo got into a flight suit and joined the pilot and the navigator.

"Leo," Lepus said, the first time Leo recalled him ever using his actual name in the entire course of their friendship.

"I'm going and that's that."

There was no more to say and so neither of them spoke.

Leo and the crew boarded the vexboat.

15.

The generator wailed babylike as it powered up. Then scraping metal, a high-intensity whirr, and a dimensional window opened just ahead of the boat.

It did not shine or shimmer, but only bent the light of the basement so it appeared fractured; straight lines vaulting away at impossible right angles.

The generator stabilised. The pilot gave the rudders a few jabs and they angled fine. The throttle responded.

The pilot shouted over the generator, "Everything in order, sir."

Leo had nothing to pray to, though he felt the urge. "Carry on as you like, please. Into fourspace we go."

The pilot pushed the throttle to full. The vexboat glided towards the dimensional window.

Through the porthole Leo clearly observed the exact line between threespace and four, the boat passing over the threshold, the phenomena of the world warping into fractal nonsense.

A deafening crash. Leo was thrown out of his seat, impacting his head.

He regained proper consciousness on the floor of the basement. Lepus picked him back up onto his feet.

“Don’t look,” Lepus said. “Not yet.”

Leo looked.

The boat had been cleaved in half, Leo’s section laying exploded on its side, the front section absent.

“What happened. . .” Leo murmured.

“The window might’ve been angled wrong. It closed, cut everything in half.”

There was no ash and no rubble and the cut was perfect.

16.

A private funeral was held two days later in the Science Cemetery. Leo and Lepus attended. The families of the pilot and the navigator accepted the offered condolences, but were curt.

Lepus saw to it that the official cause of death was listed vaguely in the newspapers, though that morning someone had leaked enough details to confirm the fiasco semi-accurately.

“They died unnecessarily,” the pilot’s father said to Leo, and refused to meet his eyes.

The caskets were buried, the graves were filled, and the ceremony was concluded.

Leo caught the overland train back through town, no destination in mind. He only knew if he didn’t move about, he’d lose his mind.

An old woman on the train looked up from her newspaper and stared. A man got on with children and quietly pointed Leo out to the children and they did not look away.

Leo got off at a random station downtown and bought three litres of wine and walked down to the riverbank. He took off his shoes and sat with his feet in the river and the first litre of wine went down fine.

As the pilot's casket was going into the ground, the pilot's mother had looked back to Leo for just a moment and smiled. She *pitied* him, he realised, for bearing witness to the accident.

Wisdom isn't the only phenomenon missing a mathematical signifier, he thought. *Compassion is a universal constant too.*

17.

Leo drank through the night by the river and shivered when it got cold and warmed up when it hit morning.

The wine was finished and he knew that no matter how much more he drank, the anaesthetic effect was depleted.

He caught a train, the destination random again. The commuters stared again. He was so tired and drunk he didn't care.

He tried to catch himself in the mirror of his own mind.

Why can't I choose to stop feeling like this? I can choose to move an arm or a leg. Why don't I have any control over the mechanisms of my mind? I have done something horrific to innocent people and there isn't another soul in the universe who could possibly understand the weight of this thing. Or, there is one, but I should not like to meet her again, ever.

He got off at Euclidia, bought cigarettes. He sat on a wall outside the train station and saw the pilot's smiling mother in many of the passing faces.

He noticed a woman sitting on the opposite wall, drinking a beer.

She nodded and Leo nodded back. She came over and sat beside him. She said, "Will you tie my shoes? All my knots come undone."

He tied her shoelaces. She finished her beer and brought another from her bag and started on that. She said, "Wow, your eyes. They look really tired."

He nodded.

“Don’t you talk?” she asked.

“I talk.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

The girl took off her jacket to reveal ink-drawn symbols and arrows up her arms. “I have a routine,” she said. “Eight o’clock, I go to Vazov Park to watch the curlroses growing. Nine o’clock, I go to Kunchev Boulevard and buy a coffee from the dying man with the dog. Twelve, I take a break for lunch.”

Her fingernails were dirty, and her hands were scratched, and her coat was matted and stained. She poured beer into her mouth, inadvertently displaying yellowed teeth.

“Where do you sleep?” Leo said.

“Nice try, creep.”

“No, not like that. Where do you sleep?”

“On a bench in Cyan.”

Who were these lost and wandering folk Gearheart was so full of? Where did they congregate? What did they eat?

He tried to imagine it: hungry, dispossessed, still a devotee of alcohol, but not by choice this time—rather by virtue of a lack of choices.

He thought, *And here I am, sleeping on a feather bed, well-fed enough to sport a belly.*

And here they sleep on park benches, so lost they don’t even know they’re lost.

Is there a more opulent society imaginable than one that builds spaceships while its population starves?

The girl prodded his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“Should I?”

He murmured, “I’m the dean of Gearheart.”

She laughed so hard she dropped her cigarette. “Sure, and I’m Empress Jetsunma of Bodhi.”

Laughing, he thought. *How is she laughing? This, living like this, and laughing, same as that pilot’s mother. Broken, yet light.*

Leo said, “What’s your name?”

“Albena Patzela.”

“Albena, would you like to join us as a scholar at Gearheart University?”

“I didn’t finish school.”

He delivered the admissions speech right there and then, inducting her into the Economics Faculty with full honours. He promised her an office and as much funding as she wanted, that she could hire whomever she wanted. He asked only that she ensure no one went hungry or homeless on Gearheart ever, ever again.

She accepted ironically. Then later, seeing the guards and scholars nod deferentially to Leo as they passed in the street, she accepted sincerely.

18.

Leo got home and was unable to sleep. The silence was too much.

Within the silence he could hear the blood in his ears, and the water pipes of the apartment, and the electrical cables and the crystal circuits; then the bivniks and carts of the street, and the click-clacking foot taps of nervous passengers on their way to work for some meeting or project’s conclusion; then the stacking of parchment as those projects were completed; a road built, a widget made, a bed assembled or house designed; then the grappling of hands to buy and use those commodities; the undulating crowds of folk walking about beneath an unsacred sky, breathing, reproducing, expiring; and the shouting, and the never-verbalised shouting, *Why me?* or, *Why not me?* or, *My God, there’s nothing but this.*

Just left and right, and Saturday and Sunday, and eating and screwing, and foraging about on the beach of truth for decades, alone, unmoored, searching, the tide coming and going, apathetic to you, to everyone.

Then all of it paying off—suddenly you glimpse a perfect promise of wisdom on that beach, something to give all the misery meaning: a message in a bottle; a message in a bottle just waiting there for you in the sand, just waiting there to explain everything, to reward you for all your misery and searching, the Truth Behind It All.

And you open that bottle with such glee, your fingers shaking so violently in anticipation you can hardly pull the paper from the bottle—knowing that the broken and lonely days are over, the promise that all this torment and wandering was but the prelude to real existence, to your real life of goodness and belonging and certainty in all things.

And your eyes race across the paper to find the paper is blank.

And the other side is blank.

And you put the paper back inside the bottle and reseal it with the cork.

And you throw the bottle back into the sea.

And you do not look for messages in bottles again.

19.

Marta expected Dr Tereshkov to stop teaching classes a while until the vexboat disaster blew over in the news, but there he still was most mornings, lecturing from his chair at the front, admittedly with red eyes and speech more slurred than usual. Even as a hermit Marta had heard rumours among the students—reports of him sighted slumped against bars or urinating in alleys.

She bought as many newspapers as she could from the previous few days and studied the articles reporting the alleged vexboat event. There was no consensus on what had caused the accident itself, but plenty of theories abounded that Marta knew made no sense; Devan sabotage and so on.

The only interesting explanation presented was that the craft had entered Vex at an improper angle, cutting itself in half.

Marta examined the leaked hull photos. The shear was perfect, more precise than a machine could manage.

Madeleine dropped in to check on Marta's investigation, interrupting occasionally to spin, *Shouldn't we be doing homework?* Or, *Would you like to join me outside for a walk?*

Marta politely replied she would agree to homework or a walk only if Madeleine was willing to explain the secrets of travel in fourspace.

Madeleine politely declined.

20.

To the theoretics library then, where Marta had the same status as the beloved patron of a bar.

She and Madeleine located Dr Lepus and Dr Tereshkov's original paper on mechanical fourspace manipulation. Many of the equations were outdated now, but the idea had been enough to inspire a generation of native Gearheartians into vexolology.

Finally she found what she'd been after: the primary tensor equation. In just half a line of variables, it defined the boundary between threespace and four, the separation point just slightly above the Planck length. Any sufficiently serrated surface could slice open a window into higher-dimensional space. All Vex technology had sprung from that one equation, she knew—the proof that Vex would submit not just to moksha and incantations but number and reason also.

Studying the equation, she saw that her intuitions were correct. Leo and Lepus had originally included a directional factor, a constant that defined a *true north* and *true south* in Vex.

They had abandoned the idea in later papers, pretending it was only ever a joke.

She knitted her thumbs.

What is it? Madeleine span.

21.

Leo woke to a knock on his office door. He moaned *enter* and in came Lepus, followed shyly by Marta and Madeleine. Leo made no effort to pretend he hadn't been sleeping on the floor.

"What's all this?" he said, suspecting some kind of intervention was about to be held.

Lepus prodded Marta. "Your clever student here might have solved our dimensional window problem."

Leo muttered, "I doubt it. I've tried every configuration in phase space. The equations don't resolve."

Marta said, “They don’t need to. The equations aren’t the problem. Intuition is.”

“What?”

“Madeleine, is it true that no spyle will help with building technology for us or improving our sciences?”

That’s right, Marta.

“But you told me you know why it is the accident happened and that there was, in theory, a way to stop it happening again?”

I did.

“Which also means you understand travel in fourspace.”

Yes.

“So, you can’t reveal the specifics, but technically there’s nothing to stop you—”

Leo cut in, “She can pilot for us.”

Marta nodded. “There’s nothing forbidden about that, as long as the secret of the window problem isn’t given away. She can feel her way through fourspace intuitively, just like a Deva.”

Leo considered the thing. He said pleadingly to Madeleine, “Darling, if you’d just tell us *why* the window problem is happening, you might save hundreds of lives.”

We’ve discussed technological intervention at great length, Leo. No spyle will do that for you.

Lepus crouched to Leo’s eye line. “Your holiness, you know I don’t like exploitation of the world without understanding it any more than you do, but in this one case how about we make an exception?”

Leo surveyed the three of them. “It doesn’t matter what I say, you’re going to do this anyway, aren’t you?”

“Obviously,” Lepus said.

22.

Mriga had taken native-form, working at his laboratory table. Hisarya presented as a native also, sagging eyes, her complexion pallid.

At last Mriga brought the usual tray in the usual configuration, the powder and the pipe.

Hisarya said, “Perhaps tomorrow. . .”

“By tomorrow our enemies will be one step closer to ensuring our demise. By the next day, closer yet.”

She met his eyes. They were staring at her as though she were the goddess she wished to be.

Mriga said, “When we attain Nibbana, nothing will ever hurt again. This will have been worth it.”

She thought, *And what will you do with your slice of heaven, Master? Will you finally find your peace too?*

She sat on a cushion and assumed full lotus position, entering into meditation.

Mriga packed the pipe with the new jhanamoksha strain and rang the ceremony gong.

He said, “I can find no anomalies with this new recipe. If you still can’t enter Nibbana, I believe the problem is your technique.”

He rang the gong again, leading her further into calm. “Are you quite ready?”

Hisarya nodded.

Mriga put the pipe to her nose and blew.

The jhanamoksha burned her nostrils immediately, stung right into her brain. She fell backwards, cried out, felt the world as a great expanse of cloth that had been torn in ten directions.

Samsara was gone. Vex was gone.

Then, an explosion of delinquent and frantic colour, of sensations mismatched, as though distance was tasted, and time was seen—every neuron redirected and retreating like fish finding the aquarium smashed, and left to gurgle on the polished floor.

She cried out. She saw the sound of her cry, green and red, curling away in giddy ribbons.

She went to cover her eyes and discovered she could not find her eyes, nor her hands to cover them.

Several minutes of this and she calmed a little.

Her vision returned first, a sense to cling onto at least, though what she saw bore no relation to anything samsaric or vexolological.

She turned her head and the world whirled vertically and horizontally at the same time.

Is this truly Nibbana? she thought. *It certainly isn't Vex.*

By singing, she learned to associate what came from her mouth with what she had intended to come out.

Low-pitched calls were blue and oblong. High-pitched calls were yellow and hexagonal.

It was not intuitive, but at least the horror had subsided.

A smear of light appeared suddenly before her, clearly too patterned for randomness. The smear drew close, examining.

She shouted as best as she could, "I am Jetsunma, Empress of the Bodhi Empire and second coming of Lord Anaximander."

The light remained silent.

"I am Jetsunma, Empress of the Bodhi Empire," she said again, her voice curling about in helices.

The smear of light retreated from her.

She desperately tried to follow but could find no way to move through this new space.

The light vanished.

Hisarya woke, returned to Samsara, face and nose bloody. Mriga was cleaning the blood from her with the detachment one might afford a dead body. He said, "You didn't break through, did you?"

"I saw something. . ." she murmured.

"What?"

"I'm sure it was a creature, but it wouldn't talk to me."

Mriga said, "You were hallucinating. There are no creatures beyond Vex. You didn't break through."

"Perhaps the recipe is still faulty."

"My chemistry technique is perfect. That is not the problem. We must try again immediately."

"My lord. . ." she whispered, tearful. "I am not sure I can bear more of this."

“Well then, Maitreya,” he said with evident discontent, “have you and Osho Pechev considered birthing a child?”

Hisarya froze, could not speak, could find no possible course of action but to shake her head.

Mriga continued, “It is my belief that an embryo could be implanted with this recent jhanamoksha strain. The resulting foetus would produce jhanamoksha in its body naturally, much like you do with moksha. And as you took to Vex so quickly in those first months of our training, so would your child take to Nibbana if the procedure is successful. I suggest you discuss the matter with Osho Pechev.”

She experienced absolute stupefaction, unable to form coherent thoughts.

She only stared out the window, desperate to pin her consciousness to something that was not this moment. Nor this chamber. Nor this life.

“In the meantime, however. . .” Mriga said and repacked the jhanamoksha pipe.

23.

Hisarya woke several hours later, fractured.

One eye was trapped in Samsara, the other in Vex, so that her chamber appeared a two-faced thing.

She reached for water. The glass fell, smashed. The noise rang out in both world-modes, threespace and four, deafening.

She lit a candle with firemagic. She crawled from her bed, raised herself before the mirror.

Below her nostrils ran dried stalactites of blood. Her eyes were cracked and red, one pupil too large, one too small.

In Vex she peered through the walls, through the floor. Thousands of initiates and oshos and hemi-oshos were sat in meditation before statuettes of Hisarya. Thousands of cooks and orderlies and artists were busying about in chambers below, preparing dishes in Hisarya’s name, composing poetry on Hisarya’s wisdom.

When the tears came, she did not wipe them.

She looked beyond the balcony to the ten thousand lights of Bodhi, to those folk staying up into the night to worship in her name.

She looked to the sky, to the tens of worlds of the Bodhi Empire, all of them striving further on the pohod in her name.

With shaking fingers, she reached under her mattress to that cavern in Vex even Mriga did not know of.

She drew out an old bundle of parchment. She read it lying on the floor by the light of the dying candle.

Geometry for Ocelots *by Leo Tereshkov (eleven and three-quarter years old)*

There was once a lonely ocelot lost in the forest.

Where were her mama and papa?

Where was her brother?

24.

At the helm of the new vexboat prototype were Leo and Madeleine—Leo slumped in the cockpit chair, Madeleine collapsed to dust and integrated within the boat's crystal circuits.

Leo checked and double-checked the gauges, the steam systems, the circuitry stabilities, the control fins. Satisfied, he shrugged to Lepus through the porthole. Lepus gave a mocking salute.

"Ready?" Leo said.

Madeleine hummed affirmatively from somewhere below.

He activated the vexrig—the sudden tang of ammonia, a rumble from the back of the craft.

A circular patch of air shimmered ahead now, lens-like.

Leo pushed the throttle to maximum and ceded full helm control to Madeleine. The craft nosed into Vex.

He clamped his eyes shut, waiting for an explosion, or a silent, deathly shearing.

Ten seconds.

Fifteen.

No explosion or shearing came, only the clang of the oxygen pumps and little pings of pressure change, then nonsense lights and chattering echoes of hideous almost-white noise, and the craft jolted so violently Leo was thrown at the ceiling and caught by his seatbelt.

He snatched glances through the main porthole—light folding about on itself, everything at right angles to the world he knew, little different to that day he had fallen into the Vex lake, though seen now from the safety of his little threespace sanctuary.

With the relief of entering Vex already passed, Leo's mind turned to every other danger.

What if the oxygen pumps fail? What if the newmetal cladding fails and fourspace bleeds in?

He fumbled a cigarette from his top pocket, lit it.

An explosion of turbulence. Everything jangled and whined. He squinted for the chronometer. Forty seconds. Thanks to relatively shorter distances in Vex, they must be—what?—just passing through the stratosphere of Gearheart's sky.

Leo was thrown starboard, port, felt something crack in his leg.

Now there was nothing even remotely familiar beyond the portholes, just muddled, turbulent grey.

The sky isn't a challenge to man, it's a boundary, Leo thought. *It's a natural boundary, and we're so audacious we couldn't even take the hint. What if I died here, now, my body all mangled and fallen back to the ground? Maybe some tears at the funeral, maybe not, then nothing. And Gearheart would be fine. And Lepus would be fine. I'm dirt. Hell, I'm dirt*.

Darkening outside. . . still darkening. . . black.

Madeleine cut the propellers.

The boat slipped back into threespace.

Another jolt and the stars returned.

Madeleine span the boat about with the gas jets, countered the momentum, stabilised.

Leo unclipped his seatbelt and found he could leave the floor just by pushing off with a finger.

Madeleine emerged from the circuitry and took up sphere-form. She span, *Leo, maybe come and look at this when you're ready.*

He floated clumsily over to the starboard porthole, his cigarette smoke just as uncoordinated as he was.

A green-blue jewel hung before them, turning slowly, perfect: Gearheart.

"Oh Madeleine. . ."

She brushed up against him, purring.

He glanced to the chronometer again. One hundred and thirty-two seconds. He thought, *From the subterranean research halls of Gearheart to the vacuum of space in two damn minutes.*

Relief. Boundless, all-pervasive relief.

They floated silently, marvelling.

Luscious, water-gilded Gearheart, and stars, and the black, and silence.

Entropy, he thought. *It's baked into everything. But there are little pockets of rare resistance. Even if the universe is winding down, new stars are born. Our civilisations were born.*

That's where we'll live: between the beginning and end of everything, in the Sunshine Middle of the World.

Even if our projects diminish and take us all drowning with them, even if we never find Absolute Meaning, we'll build and we'll love. We'll endure until we can't.

We are the fighters of entropy.

All is possible again.

25.

The boat slipped out of Vex and onto the lawn of the Art Faculty of Gearheart University. Onlookers gathered.

Leo stepped from the boat, Madeleine whirling excitedly at his side. He declared the first-ever mechanical passage through Vex to be a success.

News spread quickly and by evening Gearheart was all drink and good cheer, whole streets closed down for parties, wine cellars run dry.

The physicists went to their blackboards at once, drawing up more and more elaborate Vex field equations to throw boats further and faster across space.

The engineers went to their desks at once, drawing up larger and larger boats to carry five, ten, one hundred Gearheart folk to wherever audacity demanded.

26.

Midnight. Leo, Lepus, and Marta watched the celebratory fireworks from Lepus' office, Madeleine lying at their feet like a contented dog.

We are the fighters of entropy, Leo thought again. He said, "Miss Kuneva."

Marta said, "Dr Tereshkov."

"I'm not sure I ever said, but my situation is rather similar to yours. I was originally also an orphan."

"You never said, no."

"And I know you're technically almost an adult, and it might be strange to suggest, and you tell me if it is, but I was wondering if you'd consider allowing me to adopt you. To adopt you officially, I mean. As my daughter. I know it's a little out of the blue—"

"Yes," Marta said. "I would like that."

Leo waited for Lepus to make some mean joke of it all. Instead, he refilled Leo and Marta's drinks, hugged them both, and returned to watching the fireworks.

The three of them would stay up until Ursula's sunrise turned the city purple.

They would walk among the people, among the cheering and the music.

They would eat until their stomachs hurt and dance until their feet hurt.

They would commit this night to their memories, bury it so deeply and safely that even if Gearheart should one day fall at the hands of chaos and

malignancy, even if matter and time should one day come unstuck, even if everything should perish forever without recovery, they could never doubt there had been at least one night in the history of the harsh universe when all had been well.

They would crawl into their beds later speechless, aching, exhausted, and, for once, excited to wake to the coming day and all the good things it promised.

All was possible again.

VIII

Many will claim they are wise. Do not believe them; the wise are quiet.
Many will claim they know nothing. Do not believe them; how could they know that?
If you must seek the advice of anyone, make it the drunk. He knows the game means nothing and wins it by not playing.

- Excerpts from **The Rambling Sutras of Lord Lepus**

1.

The Bodhi Empire claimed its twenty thousandth world without ceremony.

Leo and Lepus quietly agreed it was time to expand Gearheart's reach beyond their own, lone planet.

They had been contacted repeatedly by various Devan Union worlds hinting at a breakaway to the Gearheart cause. The messages sat in an ignored pile of parchment on Leo's desk.

One night Leo and Lepus got drunk on moonshine and chose a message at random.

The message was from a world called Eleshnitsa—short, ungrammatical, probably an adding machine had been used, translating literally from Staritae. Of particular note, the message ended:

We wish to know more regarding your rumoured technological miracles. Possible is it to witness in person?

A fleet of vexboats was waiting in Gearheart orbit and could leave for Eleshnitsa at a moment's notice.

Leo and Lepus drank more moonshine and threw darts at names on a wall. The darts declared Marta and Madeleine would travel to Eleshnitsa.

They threw a coin. The coin declared Leo would also travel to Eleshnitsa, Lepus remaining behind on Gearheart in what Leo called a "pseudo-administrative non-drunk capacity."

2.

Though vexboats were already peppered throughout the Gearheart solar system, this was the first major expedition beyond it; all vacuum-packed rice and irradiated fruit, all sewing kits and star charts.

There the fleet sparkled in the black then: nine hundred souls careening through fourspace.

The Johannes took lead of the fleet, its hull wide as a Gearheart suburb. Two hundred crew busied about its corridors, tending to equipment, freedebating with spyles, relaxing in libraries, watering arboretums.

The Irate Librarian trailed faithfully just behind, a little smaller, a little nimbler.

Then, *That's Mr Sir to You* and a number of maintenance boats that flitted giddily between the fleet like gnats.

They set off for the interstellar night.

3.

The Johannes and its sister boats were not three days into their journey when an encrypted distress signal was detected at the edge of the Gearheart solar system. The fleet altered course and surfaced back into threespace.

Pulling its fins from Vex, *The Johannes* appeared some great whale emerging from an invisible sea, throwing off the froth of higher-dimensional geometry.

With the return of a universe they recognised, the crew pinned themselves to the portholes, squinting at stars, struggling to make out the source of the distress call.

From her radar station on the bridge of *The Johannes*, Marta said grimly, "Three miles ahead."

The helmsman brought them in.

The Johannes' calcium oxide lamps were lit, and there, suddenly before them, was a Gearheart trawler boat.

It whirled aimlessly, breached, its radio net flailing behind like hair on the surface of water.

4.

Leo, Marta, and the rescue party donned pressure suits; their heads encased in transparent bubbles.

Marta's hair was blonde and rowdy. Her eyes were fixed and sure, just a few short years from proper wisdom.

Leo was accruing wrinkles about his face, hair salt and pepper, eyes yellowing slightly from many late nights with a bottle. He said, "If you see something—"

"Shout, I know," Marta said.

Pressures were equalised. Boots were magnetised. The docking light came lit.

The bulkhead rolled aside. The rescue party entered the trawler boat.

No lights. Debris floated all about in the glare of their shoulder lamps, pens and bolts and boot laces; everything twirling, dead, and weightless.

Marta gasped and Leo followed her gaze. A woman's body, decapitated. The woman was wearing science robes—a high-scholar. Leo searched for her identity badge and vaguely recognised the woman's name from the Astroengineering Guild, an old squeeze of Lepus'.

Further in, another body, also missing its head, a physicist this time.

"Darling—" Leo said.

"I'm okay," Marta murmured.

The library, the canteen, the infirmary, a bustle of headless, floating cadavers.

Leo spotted the identity badge of a girl from Marta's second year bivnik mechanics class. She'd been a clever one, reached half-scholar in just four years. Leo had personally recommended her for the trawler program.

Before Marta could catch sight of the girl, Leo said, "Would you check the backup utilities, see if they got to the repair equipment in time?"

Marta gone, Leo pulled the girl's body from zero gravity and laid her in one of the bunks in the dormitory and covered her in a blanket. He teared up and tried to shake it off, and the tears only bounced about in his helmet.

Next he checked the crystal circuits for the flight record. The crew had been trawling this area of space at Leo's confidential request, searching with their great electromagnetic net for any hit of the third *Annica* signal.

Sure enough, there the signal was, waiting in the adding machine's memory circuits. Leo copied down the coordinates. Knowing the previous two signal locations by memory, he did a little mental arithmetic.

He sighed inwardly. The third signal confirmed it. The source must be from the edge of the galaxy, further than any Deva could travel.

He scavenged the adding machine for more records.

There was only one other entry, an automatic update from the radar. Sixteen unknown entities had approached the trawler via Vex at almost half the speed of light. The crew wouldn't even have had time to reach their defence stations before the intruders arrived.

Marta called for Leo from another chamber, the diminutive she used only on special occasions, *Bashta.* Leo went floating in.

There on the wall, drawn in blood, was an ocelot—her eyes closed in sacred contemplation.

5.

The Johannes towed the perished trawler boat into the orbit of Gearheart's star. The boat circled about in the star's corona a while, then went diving into the fire and was cremated.

The Johannes and the fleet slipped back into Vex, heading out of the solar system, racing across the interstellar void at right angles to threespace, bound again for Eleshnitsa.

Leo and Marta had dinner in the boat's observatory. They were silent for a long time, the two of them only watching the strange light show beyond the porthole. In fourspace, stars were loops of white fire tangling about on one another, seeming to stretch infinitely outwards, or contract to nothing.

Marta said, "Was it Bodhi who attacked the trawler?"

Leo nodded.

"And if Bodhi checked the crystal circuits aboard. . ."

"Then they at least know where the third signal is coming from. Hisarya won't stand for another 'second coming', even if it's Anaximander. She probably has her oshos looking for the fourth signal now."

Marta said, “Do you believe it’s Anaximander sending the signal?”

“Hisarya does, and that’s what matters.”

Leo kept his eyes on the porthole, watched a red-green tangle of bows and knots—a fourspace representation of a threespace nebula.

Now and then the strangeness of this mode of travel struck him; gliding through that same four-dimensional water he and Hisarya had almost drowned in decades ago, in that same impossible geometry where, for just a moment, the world had made sense.

Little seemed to recently.

Still, he thought, *we have the third signal.*

Upon that world, upon Annica, wherever it was, might survive ancient technology or ancient theoretics capable of killing bivnik. Or—such a radical thought Leo let his mind consider it only in non-committal passing—upon that world, wherever it was, might survive the first and last true scientist, the Great One who’d learned to see the world not by its presentations, but its essence.

And that, without a doubt, was yet a finer vice than drink.

6.

La Geometrica Familia sat within a seemingly infinite, purple meadow of moksha.

These days the common Bodhi people lived in modest straw huts amid the meadow, rising at dawn each day to pray towards the cathedral, then undertaking backbreaking labour until sundown.

Corpses littered the holy city, littered the world: the aftermath of Mriga’s insistence that moksha production should not be limited to piecemeal plantations, but extend across the entire globe.

Breather masks were neither prescribed nor provided.

Probabilistically it was a fair gamble. Some natives would learn to tolerate moksha. Some would overdose.

No funerals were held for the dead. No plaques or shrines were erected. The bodies were collected by lowly semi-oshos and taken into the grounds

of La Geometrica Familia, whereupon the concentrated moksha was reclaimed from the flesh and used for incense and jhanamoksha research.

Occasionally some outspoken peasant would criticise the needless deaths, sometimes even attempt to stage an insurrection.

The response from Mriga was always the same.

First the peasant was decapitated.

Then their moksha was reclaimed in the name of the church.

7.

Lord Pechev materialised at the door of Hisarya's chamber. In his paw he carried an asanawa cord. Bound along the cord were many severed native heads.

He rapped upon the door.

Lord Mriga answered, presenting in deer-form, and looked Pechev up and down.

Pechev made some mockery of a ceremonial bow. He said, "I bring the empress a gift."

Mriga said, "Gifts are for children."

Pechev presented the cord and the heads. "A Gearheart craft, they were searching for the holy signal."

Mriga put his nose indelicately close to Pechev's. "I am aware of the ambush. And it is not a *holy* signal, as has been established. The Maitreya has returned to us already in the form of Empress Jetsunma, and you'd do well to remember that."

"Still, I'd like to see the empress, to present her with this offering."

"The empress is meditating."

"You've said the same for weeks now. The child is almost born, and I should like to see Jetsunma before that. She is missed."

"The empress is quite above such sentimental rubbish. If you are in need of gratification, perhaps you can acquire it from someone amid your lowly phalanx ranks."

Pechev ceremonially bowed goodbye. Then, pretending to turn about, he instead ran through Vex, through the chamber wall. For just a moment he caught sight of Hisarya. She was lying motionless on her bed, stomach enormous with child.

Mriga blocked Pechev's path, biting his shoulder so hard that he roared with pain.

Pechev fell back into the corridor and licked his wound. He shouted, "You will allow me inside."

"The empress must have no distractions at this crucial time."

Pechev ran at the door again, but Mriga folded his asanawa cord through Vex, creating a makeshift barrier of knots.

Pechev untangled himself, fell back against the wall. He spat, "I subverted her for you in Old Bodhi. I brought her to you."

"And for that you have Bodhi's thanks."

"You told me I'd be rewarded."

"You control the entire Bodhi military. You hold one of the highest positions in the church. You sit at the empress' left hand, are the father of her child no less. You did not moderate your ego, and now it has eaten you."

Slowly, lowly, Pechev said, "Let me see her. Let me see her or I'll be back here with every phalanx and osho I can muster."

Mriga only bowed and made to step away in Vex. Then, in an afterthought, he said shrewdly, "Actually, there is something you might assist with."

"*Assist* with? I'm well past your demands."

"Even if in exchange you might see your lover and child?"

"I'll damn well see them both anyway."

Mriga smiled mock-apologetically. "No. You won't."

Pechev looked as though he'd charge again, then sank into himself. Defeated, he said, "What is it you want?"

"Ayakashi, you remember him?"

"He killed tens of folk in Old Bodhi, I was there."

Mriga's black eyes glinted. "He was my finest student until the vile bear disabused him of his life. The position of assassin of the Holy Court has

been vacant for some time now. If you should be willing to accept my training and perform a task on behalf of the Holy Court, I would swear to reunite you with your wife, and subsequently your child. Does this sound appealing?”

Pechev looked down to the severed native heads, the eyes frozen in wide fright, the mouths frozen in a silent scream.

No, they said. *No, no, no*.

“Yes,” Pechev said.

8.

Hisarya gave birth in the winter of the fortieth kalpa.

Only a midwife was present, too afraid of the empress even to attempt eye contact.

Drugged so heavily with an anaesthetic variant of moksha, Hisarya felt nothing of the birth. She only watched the snow falling beyond the window as the midwife tried to provide soothing encouragement from what felt a universe away.

Eventually the child was presented to Hisarya. She had spent much of the pregnancy promising herself she would not look upon it even once. After only a few moments though she could not resist, and met the infant’s gaze.

“A boy,” the midwife said, and offered the baby tentatively.

Blood of my blood, Hisarya thought.

She took the baby in her arms. She tried to keep her highmind aloof, but could not. She tried to look away, but could not.

The baby’s irises were circular, like a native. Then, peering closer, Hisarya saw they were rather so jagged they only appeared circular from a distance. In fact they were fervidly complex, marked by curves and intersections, almost fractal, intricate as a mandala.

She examined his face a long time, examined his skin. There were no marks from Mriga’s procedure, no hint that this child was producing jhanamoksha internally.

The baby reached at random, jiggled its legs as though trying to walk already. Hisarya put her finger in the baby's hand and it grasped.

The midwife said, "Has madam chosen a—"

"Hristo," Hisarya said, surprising herself. "He is Hristo." *Though to me, and only me, he will be the diminutive: Itzo. My Itzo.*

Mriga had demanded she consult him before deciding on a name, for it should be ordained via holy ceremony.

He would be angry.

For once Hisarya did not care.

9.

Itzo was crawling by the second day and walking by the third week. By the first month he had perfect object permanence.

Mriga attended Hisarya's chamber occasionally with gifts, though clearly his visits were motivated by checking on the child's progress. Not once had he mentioned more experiments with the jhanamoksha pipe and Hisarya was grateful for this. Her nose no longer stung at all hours, and her mind had returned to some degree.

She revelled in the quiet evening hours, Itzo asleep on her chest.

There was no point resisting the pull of parenthood. It called to her as Vex had—something outside of rationalisation and sense, a rightness.

Beyond the window, millions of lives depended on her. Their futures were uncertain.

In this chamber, only one life depended on her. Its future was also uncertain, but she swore to herself daily that she would make it a good one.

10.

It was around Itzo's first birthday that Mriga took great pains to addict him to chocolate. Then, suddenly, he forbade Itzo chocolate.

The child didn’t cry, but only wore a confused, sad stare. One morning Mriga placed a good deal of chocolate on the bookshelf above Hisarya’s bed.

“My lord. . .” Hisarya said.

“If he really is as gifted as we believe, he might learn to reach through Vex without training. He should have already by now. He is lazy.”

The two of them watched the child in Vex for hours, waiting to see if he might spontaneously intuit fourspace. Itzo only sat quietly and watched them back.

Hisarya woke in the evening to find Mriga in native-form, grinning, perched at the end of her bed and holding Itzo. The child’s face was smeared in chocolate.

“He was successful?” Hisarya said.

“No, I was watching in Vex the entire time. He never once passed through it.”

“Then how. . .”

Mriga ordered the handmaiden to fetch a curtain of newmetal. The handmaiden returned with it some minutes later and Mriga set the newmetal between Itzo and Hisarya so they could not see one another.

“Call for him,” Mriga said.

“This is cruel. . .”

“Call for him. There is no passing through newmetal via Vex. You know this.”

Hisarya cooed Itzo’s name quietly. Louder and he still did not come.

Only some minutes later did Mriga nod behind her to where little Itzo had appeared already on her pillow, watching without comment as a scientist might a mouse.

Hisarya whispered, “I did not see his coming. . .”

“He did not move through Vex.”

“Then. . .”

“Nibbana,” Mriga said with a dark smile. Hisarya had never seen him so delighted. “He already intuits *Nibbana*.”

11.

Itzo’s trips through Nibbana became an almost routine event. Mriga left treats scattered across the palace grounds, and the layfolk reported the spectre of a child appearing from the air to devour a hidden rusk or sweet, and vanish as quickly as he had come.

All was not perfect, however. By three years old he had still made no utterances resembling speech, nor seemed to understand speech. His hearing was checked by the seers of the Holy Court: fine. His mind was also checked: unusual, but fine.

He recoiled at any touch that was not his mother’s, cried out if handmaidens came near, or if Mriga attempted to pick the boy up in some mockery of avuncular affection.

It was deep in the winter of the forty-fourth kalpa that a parchment decree came to Hisarya. The decree did not address Hisarya by her holy titles; Mriga had given up such formalities not long after Itzo’s birth.

The parchment stated that Itzo was too old to remain deprived of full-time religious instruction any longer, and would live now with Mriga.

Hisarya responded politely but curtly that Itzo was still developing emotionally and required much of the sort of instruction only a mother could provide.

12.

Many seers and priests barged into Hisarya’s chamber, then Mriga and his personal oshos in tow. Itzo hid beneath the bedsheets.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Hisarya said.

Mriga spoke without warmth, as though to an inmate. “The child still has not been delivered to me.”

“*Delivered*?”

“Delivered, *my lord*,” Mriga chided. “Or have we dispensed with titles already?”

“If you’re trying to steal my child from me, then yes,” Hisarya snapped. The seers and priests stepped back uncertainly, looking from Hisarya to her

master.

“Very well,” Mriga said. He signalled to his oshos. They advanced on Itzo, hands outstretched.

“Wait,” Hisarya begged. “Just wait. What if he showed the way to Nibbana?”

Mriga ordered his oshos pause. “How so?”

“Perhaps he might take us there, but he’s shy, scared of folk he doesn’t know. I could ask that he let me travel with him.”

Mriga said sceptically, “You believe this is possible?”

“I do, though it may take several attempts.”

“My fragile patience has collapsed, as it should have long ago. The boy will draw you into Nibbana now, or I will be removing him from your possession momentarily.”

“My lord—"

Mriga smashed a hoof upon the ground and the oshos gasped and bowed their heads. “I have spoken.”

Hisarya nodded.

Two oshos tied a cord around Itzo’s wrist, then around Hisarya’s wrist, binding mother and child. Next they cuffed Hisarya’s leg with newmetal so she might not use the opportunity to escape beyond the bounds of the palace.

Then, with twenty pairs of eyes of the Holy Court upon her, Hisarya said to Itzo in Staritae, ***Gentle interrogation.*** *Demand asked of you.*

Itzo said back, ***Curious.*** *Mama, what is it?*

Mriga bellowed, “The child can *speak*?”

“Not in Bodhitongue,” Hisarya said sheepishly. “It is too alien for him. Even Staritae is a struggle, but he seems to understand. . .”

“Why did you not inform me or the Holy Court of this? You will answer for it later.”

Hisarya said, ***Apology, affection, unconditional.*** *My love, there is something asked of you.* ***Technical, formality approaches.*** *That place beyond here you like so much, will you take me there?*

Itzo said, ***Proper shapes, eyes open.*** *Where the light is right and the dreams cease.*

Hisarya said, *There, yes.*

Itzo eyed Mriga and the Holy Court from behind the bedclothes. He said, *Will they come?*

Hisarya said, ***Assurance. Honest, like always, like always.*** *No, it will be you and I.*

Itzo said, *Promise?*

Hisarya kissed him on the forehead. *Promise.*

Itzo stood uncertainly to his small feet. The Holy Court drew back in involuntary reverence.

Then, pulling his mother by the cord, Itzo walked the two of them into Nibbana.

13.

Hisarya called out for her son in whirling red ribbons.

A Nibbana-hand found her Nibbana-hand. *Mama, I'm here.*

With her bleary vision, Hisarya apprehended seaweed-like entrails that grew massive and miniature before her eyes. She took this to be her own hair.

Next she caught sight of smears of spiky and pulsing green light that she took to be a representation of Itzo in Nibbana.

This will never be intuitive, she thought.

She remembered that little ocelot in the forest looking for its mama and papa, looking and not seeing.

See, she ordered her highmind. *See!*

And sure enough, just as one discovered their Vex-limbs upon taking moksha, so she felt the hint of her Nibbana-legs. At first it was like trying to swish a tail one did not have. Then, a little competency.

She kicked.

The jagged blue of the chamber floor grew more distant, and simultaneously closer.

The rippling sweetness of the chamber bed translated up, and simultaneously down.

In a little spiritual joke to herself, she christened these two new directions *dana* and *sila*, as Anaximander had called the two roads to Nibbana.

Together, Hisarya and Itzo swam about, giddy fish in a tank of unknowable water, knocking up against light, pushing into cubes of hot and cold—up and down, vex and weg, dana and sila.

Now, Hisarya thought. *Which branch shall this ocelot leap to next?* only to remember the newmetal cuff about her leg.

She suddenly spied a festival of brilliant energy nearby, a frenzy of dancing light curling about itself in some arcane halo.

Hisarya said, *Hello*?

The entity swirled and rippled like a mollusc. It neared (or some fifth-dimensional equivalent.) It smelled blue and triangular.

I believe we've met before, on my first trip into Nibbana, Hisarya said. *I am Jetsunma, Empress of All.*

The entity ignored her and began exchanging light and spins with Itzo. They talked amongst themselves, far too quick and dialect-heavy for Hisarya to follow.

Hisarya sang, ***Intimate, to kin.*** *Itzo, you know this creature?*

Itzo replied, *Of course.*

Feeling suddenly protective, Hisarya mustered the last remains of her entitlement and addressed the creature directly, sang once again, *You there. I am Jetsunma, Empress of All. You will—*

Without warning, the entity seemed to explode the walls, to explode the entirety of La Geometrica Familia so only the night sky remained, burning with its one hundred billion worlds and one hundred billion galaxies, dwarfing everything to naught.

Gesturing to creation, the entity said, *Empress of All, are you empress of* this?

14.

After a month of dull transit, the Gearheart fleet finally slipped out of fourspace above the world of Eleshnitsa. It was all water, a cerulean blue ocean planet punctuated here and there by clouds.

The bridge of *The Johannes* was silent a few moments as the crew marvelled out of the portholes.

Leo said, “Any radio chatter?”

“None,” said the signalwoman.

“Well then. Please arrange a groundcraft to be—”

On the bridge appeared a squid, a centaur, and a cat. They bowed.

Several of the crew yelped, grabbing their matterspears.

“Wait, stand down,” Leo shouted.

In some strange dialect of Staritae, the squid said, “I am Ophiucus of Eleshnitsa. This is Koreli of Artist’s Hollow” — the centaur bowed. “And Freya of the Crystal Garden Worlds.” The cat prostrated in deference.

They’ve dispensed with lord and lady titles at least. . . Leo thought.

The squid continued, “Apologies for our trespass on your vehicle. We thought it best to save you the effort of making groundfall.”

Leo made a little bow and, mincing Devan grammar, said, “Please excuse me, my Staritae is. . .”

The squid said, “You speak with your mother’s dialect. In this way she continues through you. We were saddened to hear of her passing.”

“As was I,” Leo said and found he had nothing to add.

The centaur stamped a foot and all about the bridge appeared fruit and sweetbread. The centaur said, “It must have been a long journey. Please.”

Marta translated for the crew. They needed no further coaxing. They ate madly, the first fresh food they’d seen in weeks.

Amid the sounds of the impromptu banquet, the Devan cat bent to Leo and said, “We are sorry for making you travel all this way. When we sent our invitation we doubted you would come.”

“Why?” Leo said.

“Because we assumed the report of machines that could travel in Vex was a fabrication by your sister. We decided the only way to be sure was to invite you here.”

He beckoned Marta over, whispered, “Your Devan is better than mine. Feeling diplomatic?”

Marta composed herself, and said formally in Staritae, “Your kind invitation implied that you might be interested in breaking from the Devan Union.”

The cat said, “Regrettably the Union has broken away from itself already. The daughter of Ursula took the third galactic moksha plantation five weeks ago. Many worlds are defecting to her as moksha grows more scarce.”

Marta said, “We are quite aware, sirs. Is that to say. . . you don’t wish to defect to the Bodhi cause?”

“We would prefer not to. And if so, is that to say you’re willing to extend to us the secrets of this new technological travel in Vex?”

“With some caveats, yes,” Marta said, her voice wavering.

“May we ask what they are?”

“We will gift you as many vexboats as you need, or as many as we can make anyway. We will teach you to fly and maintain them. But we ask that they are not used in an offensive capacity, only defensive.”

The squid, centaur, and cat spoke in some local tongue amongst themselves a moment. Then the squid reported, “That is acceptable.”

Marta glanced up at her father as though to say, *That was easy. Now what?*

Leo said, “Forgive me, but is your population quite ready to wean themselves off moksha?”

“No,” the cat said. “We’ll never be ready. But it is either that, or join with the first tyrannical empire in thousands of years, and we of Eleshnitsa would prefer death to such a thing. Many of us feel your mother’s legacy strongly still. She would never have supported Bodhi’s violence.”

Leo said, “We agree. Gearheart has sworn never to become such animals.”

“Never to become such *brutes*,” Marta quickly corrected him. The cat smiled politely. Marta said, “We’ll provide medical supplies for the transition, of course. We have a large surplus aboard.”

The centaur said, “It is not the transition off moksha we are afraid of; this has been done plenty before. Rather it is life *after* moksha. We politely

request you remain in the vicinity of Eleshnitsa a short time to. . .” The centaur glanced to the cat. The cat said, “To teach us how to. . .” The cat glanced to the squid. The squid said, “*Native*. To teach us how to *native*.”

“Of course,” Leo said.

The centaur bowed and intoned, “Then our allegiance is yours. We shall dedicate ourselves to your pohod.”

“I’m afraid we are not advocating for a pohod, or crusade, or anything like that.”

“Then what is it your cause strives for?”

Leo searched for some way to translate their mission to kill bivnik into a metaphor these strange minds might understand, found nothing. He looked to his daughter.

“We are wanting for the end of all wanting,” Marta said.

The three Devas bowed.

Had formality not prevailed, Leo would’ve kissed Marta on the forehead with the loving pride of ten thousand fathers.

15.

A ceremonial party was held on the seabed of Eleshnitsa to celebrate the new alliance.

Oxygenated habitats were provided for the Gearheartians. To Leo’s relief, much alcohol was provided also.

The Staritae language barrier made for a gentle degree of awkwardness, but Devas and natives drank alongside each other just fine.

The Devan ambassador squid climbed atop a table and slurred in Staritae that now the moksha-reliance was dead, the Devas of Eleshnitsa and the surrounding worlds would regress back to Samsaran beings. “We shall wear our skin in the lower realms once more. What we lose in wisdom, we gain in liberty.”

Half-understanding the speech, Leo raised his glass and the Gearheartians followed suit.

Next the treaties were brought out, officiating the alliance. Leo signed his sections. The Devan squid encountered several issues with the pen, pushing it in and out of Vex, and opted to sign with his own tentacle-made ink.

Then, the alliance ratified, *The Johannes'* chief astronomer bellowed, "To the Gearheart Confederation."

"To the Gearheart Confederation," the crew echoed.

The drinking quickly grew expertly intense.

Leo retired to one of the larger viewing windows. Marine Devas were peering in, fish and sharks, eyeing the natives with open curiosity.

Marta joined him with a bottle of wine and filled both their glasses. "The Gearheart Confederation," she muttered.

"I know. . ."

"Do you have an empire now, Papa?"

"I hope not. But if so, it seems it just named itself."

16.

The fleet slipped once again into fourspace. The return to Gearheart was like all journeys back: shorter for having been this way before.

One night in the mess deck, Leo put his bivniscope to a porthole. Many stars still glowed a healthy purple, though many others shone the hues of coming death.

Soon they'll all go orange, Leo said inwardly.

Then grey.

Then gone.

He thought of Old Bodhi.

He thought of Johannes.

He thought of being small again, of Ursula so gentle and kind. Now and then she'd tried a little Staritae on him, explained that there were some words which didn't translate so well.

Zaguba—A Devan term, she said, for loss.

Though not just *loss,* she added. The *feeling* of loss. The feeling of knowing there are some things you can never regain, people you can never see again, the full acceptance of entropy.

Leo thought, *When we've sucked our galaxy dry and even our bones are gone, will something be nostalgic for us? Will anything remember?*

He looked up from the bivniscope. In the porthole was his half-reflection staring back. His eyes looked old. His skin looked old.

No more playing. No more laughing.

Zaguba.

He called for Marta across the mess deck. She came to him and he held her close.

Her face joined his in the half-reflection of the porthole glass.

He felt much better.

17.

As with any travel at high speeds, the folk of the Gearheart fleet aged considerably slower than the folk back on Gearheart itself.

The effect was much weakened for travelling in Vex, but still—for every hour on *The Johannes*, the people of Gearheart and the universe at large aged around a day or so. Leo, Marta, and Madeleine usually spent their evenings in the library attempting to ignore this fact; Madeleine playing the organ, Marta repeatedly destroying Leo at chess.

It was on the fourth week of their return journey that the helmsman reported *The Johannes* was travelling too fast.

Leo checked the readings over. If correct, the fleet was moving at one hundred and forty percent of its maximum velocity and accelerating.

Leo examined the stars manually with a sextant. The stars confirmed the speed anomaly.

He took his seat on the bridge. "Fire the retroengines, please."

The helmsman did so. Silence, save for the clacking of switches and the distant reverberation of the fuel lines.

The helmsman said, "Sir, we're not decelerating."

“Cut all power then. Manually if you have to.”

More clacking of switches. When the knotted stars in the main porthole showed no sign of slowing, the helmsman radioed the engine room. The report came that the engines were beyond control.

The acceleration only continued.

For several hours engineering teams scoured the relays and circuits all across the fleet and found no obvious problem.

The physicists were just as clueless.

Leo called Madeleine to the bridge. He used hand gestures so as not to alert the crew. *Do you know what’s happening, darling?*

I don’t, Madeleine span.

Do you think it’s a mechanical failure?

Possibly, but I doubt it.

Why? Leo said.

Because all the other boats in the fleet have the same problem.

What are you saying?

She span slowly, *It’s very likely this is intentional sabotage.*

By who, Bodhi?

I doubt they have the technical understanding to perform such a feat.

An engineer then?

To my knowledge, Lepus is the only person with enough alacrity to do this.

18.

On and on they continued to accelerate. Each morning they woke to find the stars passing slightly faster beyond the portholes, the engines running hotter and hotter.

Madeleine took several trips outside to try disabling the engines, but returned only to report there was no open access to the mechanism.

On *The Johannes’* bridge, the helmsman’s chair was always empty now, since neither *The Johannes* nor any other boat in the fleet responded to even

basic piloting controls.

It was an understood, unspoken fact across the fleet that with the increase in acceleration, time must be passing extraordinary quickly back on Gearheart. No one wished to calculate the discrepancy exactly.

Leo tried to keep the crew distracted, but madness soon took hold. Shifts were missed, fights ensued, large amounts of alcohol were consumed.

Madeleine whirled about the spyle quarters, bouncing from wall to wall. Leo took to pacing across the observation deck, counting his strides as he went. Marta barricaded herself in her quarters, pouring over design schematics of *The Johannes* and finding nothing of use.

Then, just as their supplies were dwindling and the crew had devolved to communicating in grunts and groans, the entire fleet swung itself about and began decelerating.

The Johannes' bridge crew sat in silence for many hours, watching Gearheart grow barely visible, then to a marble, then to a planet.

At last the fleet entered itself into orbit around Gearheart automatically, descended through the atmosphere, and materialised back in threespace above Gearheart University.

The crew gazed down through the portholes in quiet gasps. This was not the Gearheart they had departed from.

The patchwork architecture of the city was gone, replaced with glittering metal towers and great glass cubes—bar districts and shopping malls where faculty buildings had once sat.

And there, between the towers, rode not the bivniks and carts of Leo and Marta's recollection, but metal platforms and airborne statues, floating like dust via magic unknown.

19.

Waiting at the lip of *The Johannes'* ground ramp was a crowd, dressed not in scholar's robes, but togas of liquid glass and newmetal and gold.

Stewards appeared, spraying the ground ramp with perfume and dusting it with spices. When they were quite finished, a very round, very bejewelled man of perhaps fifty climbed the ground ramp and bowed to Leo and Marta.

With a degree of ceremony he called, “Dean Tereshkov, Dr Tereshkova, it is an honour to welcome you home. Was your trip successful?”

Leo said, “How long have we been gone?”

“Let’s not start with such—"

“How *long* have we been gone?”

“It has been forty years since your departure, sirs. Such a joy that you’re back.”

The crew stood in quiet shock, staring open-mouthed at the new buildings beneath the old mountains, at the cityfolk all covered in necklaces and jewels and pendants.

“Please,” the very round man said and shepherded Leo and Marta down to the waiting crowd. He introduced himself as Yanko Patzel, Chief Commercial Officer of the Abundance Faculty. Just as Leo was about to ask what any of that meant, a convoy of silent, all-white craft floated leisurely past, towing at least one hundred tonnes of ore by some invisible tether.

“My god. . .” Leo muttered. “Do you have negative mass fields now? Has ek science improved so much?”

Yanko Patzel said, “There have been many, *many* technological improvements in recent decades—not as a result of your absence, of course, but in spite of it. Please, come, I will gladly show you everything.”

“Where is Dr Lepus?”

“I’m sorry?”

“*Dr Lepus*, the former dean of Gearheart University.”

Yanko’s face betrayed confusion for a moment, then he laughed heartily. “Ah yes, Dr Lepus, of course. I’m afraid he retired from public life some years ago, long before I took office.”

“Took office?” Marta said.

“If you will kindly follow me, friends.”

“Papa,” Marta whispered, pointing to what had once been the bivnik clock. Now it sported a regular 28-hour face with a dancing mechanical sun on its dial, a mechanical moon blowing kisses, and written beneath in shimmering gold leaf:

BROUGHT TO YOU BY GEARHEART MUTUAL INVESTMENT FUND. FOR WHATEVER YOU'RE DOING, WHENEVER.

It struck the half-hour mark, and its bell rang out with the sound of gold coins jingling in a purse.

20.

A rabble formed about the Gearheart crew as they toured the city, much of the crowd draped in the liquid glass and newmetal necklaces and bracelets Leo already felt sick to look at.

The city itself had grown more opulent also. Not a few months ago, from Leo's perspective, the inner districts had been relatively poor, subsisting modestly on technical prowess, vodka, and hope. Now opera blared from the balconies and the pavements were spotless and shining.

They passed newmetal villas and crystal domes. Many of the old statues of scholars were gone, replaced with figures in elaborate togas pointing to the sky. The statues bore plaques—names Leo didn't recognise, as well as birthdates, though all missing deathdates.

Leo said, "Are we to understand Gearheart has perfected anti-ageing?"

Yanko said, "We certainly age at a much slower pace than when you left, sir."

"How does it work?"

Yanko smiled apologetically. "I am not the person to ask."

"Yet you seem to represent the entire planet."

"A king need not play apothecary." He smiled sweetly and adjusted his jade bracelets. "I do not count myself a king. A metaphor, you understand."

"Sure," Leo said.

The returning Gearheartians peered in through the windows of gigantic warehouses to find enormous adding machines clacking and whirring to themselves. Yanko explained this was the central financial district of the planet, and of the Gearheart Confederation.

Leo said, "There's an established confederation now?"

Yanko called out in a dialect almost entirely of vowels, and from the crowd emerged a young woman wearing what Leo recognised with relief as a scholar's robe. "Gearheart's historian in chief," Yanko said.

Thank the gods there are still academics at least, Leo thought.

The woman said, "Sir." Yanko put a reminding hand on her back, and with some reluctance she bowed.

Leo said, "If I have any authority left here, I'd like to outlaw bowing and supplication immediately."

"We'll see. . ." Yanko purred. Then catching that Leo was serious: "Of course, sir. Chief Historian, please."

The historian said, "News of Eleshnitsa's defection to the Gearheart cause spread almost immediately after you departed from there. Many worlds followed in their example, and the Gearheart Confederation has only grown since then."

"How many ex-Union planets have joined?" Leo asked.

"As of today, over fourteen hundred."

"And in that time, how many worlds have broken from the Union and sworn allegiance to Bodhi?"

Yanko beamed with good cheer. "Need we talk politics on an auspicious day such as this one?"

"*How many*."

The historian waited until Yanko was out of earshot and whispered, "Almost one hundred thousand have defected to the Bodhi cause, sir."

Yanko called, "Ah, now for the finest ice cream this side of the Meta-cluster. Please."

21.

The afternoon consisted of one long tour of the Campus Major, and bells rang out wherever Leo and the fleet crew went. Hands were presented for shaking, babies for kissing.

More new professions existed in Gearheart now than those Leo recognised. Many folk specialised in *metapsychology*, an attempt at a

cosmic theory of group behaviour.

Where once the university halls were littered with bivniscopes, now they sported huge, abacus-like instruments depicting the current allegiances and likely investment outcomes of the most prominent Gearheartian and Bodhi worlds.

Vex technology had also matured. Yanko explained that protective garments were freely available that allowed folk to step into Vex for education and research, tethered by a cord of elastic newmetal.

On a walk down yet another gleaming street, Leo caught sight of folk seemingly suspended in the air, washing windows, running errands, ten feet of undisturbed nothing beneath them; fat, levitating, bejewelled angels.

“More ek technology?” Leo said.

“No,” Yanko beamed. “Four-dimensional logistics. A robotic walking frame in fourspace, harnessed to the user in threespace. A *vexoskeleton.* Ingenious, no?”

Marta murmured, “That is actually *quite* ingenious. . .” and caught the sudden attention of her father’s glare.

They walked on.

Peering into alleys Leo caught sight here and there of folk in sleeping bags, grouped in heaps, huddling for warmth. He said, “Who are these people?”

Yanko said, “Degenerates. Some weren’t made for civil living.”

“*Degenerates*?”

A shrug of feigned apology. “All societies have their untouchables. Some dogs cannot be taught to sit. Unfortunate, unfortunate. . .”

At last they reached what Leo recognised as the Bivnistics Faculty. Now it was covered in silver and gold panelling, and about its exterior floated projections of what appeared to be share prices. A homeless man had erected a tent beneath the canopy of the reception hall, and two guards were hauling him up by the hair and dragging him away.

Leo said, “Where is the Bivnistics Faculty?”

“Bivnistics. . .” Yanko said. “Ah yes, that may be the hardest aspect of this new Gearheart for you to acclimatise to. I’m afraid we have dispensed with some of the old religious philosophies. These days we are, shall we say, more life-affirming.”

Leo went to start yelling, but Marta cut in, “Are you telling us that bivnik research is considered antiquated?”

Yanko twiddled a diamond pendant. “More a *conspiracy theory* it must be said. This building is now the Abundance Faculty.”

“And what the hell is that?” Leo snapped.

“We are indebted to the mathematics you and your contemporaries left us,” Yanko said, with honeyed gratitude. “Now that the old theoretics have matured, we use them to better Gearheart and its surrounding worlds with financial advice and economic policy consulting. The Abundance Faculty’s economists are recognised across the entire Gearheart Confederation as leaders in wealth management and investment strategy. We produce galactic net annual gains of—”

Leo caught sight of a projected image clearly bearing the likeness of Albena, the woman he’d met by the train station that dark morning after the vexboat accident. “What happened to her? Tell me about her.”

Yanko said, “Ah, Albena Patzela, the saint of the Abundance Faculty, if you will. We are still indebted to her founding wisdom.”

“She was supposed to eliminate homelessness. She was supposed to champion the poor.”

Yanko jangled his jewellery. “Such has she done, Dr Tereshkov.”

“*Patzela*,” Leo murmured. “Your last name is Patzel; is there a relation?”

“She was my mother, yes.”

Leo wanted to vomit, wanted to wrap every one of those gold chains about Yanko’s neck and pull until he stopped breathing. Attempting not to shout: “I will ask you one more time. Where is Dr Lepus?”

“I am not aware of his whereabouts. There are rumours he passed away some years ago. My condolences, of course.” A jingling bow. “Please, sir. There are many folk who wish to meet you. It is not every day that an emperor returns to survey his realm.”

22.

Leo chatted semi-politely with the surrounding crowd a while, probing after bivnik and Lepus, only to come up empty.

He and Marta set off through the metropolis. Pictures from the arrival of Leo's fleet floated above the streets.

They pushed on, past galleries sporting unfamiliar painting styles, past bookshops no longer selling books, but crystal tablets.

Evening descended, the sky shining purple. Exhausted by walking, exhausted by feeling alien, they made for Leo's old apartment.

Waiting by the apartment building was Yanko's historian, her head cloaked now.

Leo said, "More history lessons? I'm sorry, but we're rather tired."

"No more history lessons," the historian said. "If you will come with me, I can guide you to Lepus and his wife."

"*Wife*?" Leo muttered.

"Theodora, yes."

"And how do *you* know their whereabouts?"

"Because I am their daughter, Ursula."

23.

The woman who called herself Ursula led them from the gilded towers of the inner-city and out to the suburbs. Soon the buildings were plain, then dilapidated, the pavements cracked, folk sleeping upon them.

Leo asked about Theodora. Ursula claimed that, as expected, Theodora had not won a third term as High Priestess of the Devan Union. And, as expected, intimations were made of threats on her life, given her open support of bivnik action.

Only the promise of sanctuary on Gearheart was left.

She had gone into self-imposed exile, flitting from independent world to independent world, searching for a master sufficiently competent enough to trifurcate her, as per Leo's citizenship conditions.

After several years she located such a master on the hermit world of Leshtena. The master requested no payment. The agony of the procedure

would be payment enough.

And it was agony, she reported later to her daughter—the sense of having one's mind split in three, like dried meat ripped apart in bare hands, each aspect of the self divided from the other until there were no whole aspects left.

At last, she found herself on the cold stone floor of the master's operating room, with only her two trifurcated counterparts for company.

Who was she then? Not her counterparts, that became clear.

One was a man, convinced still of his high-standing.

The other was a woman, base, almost immediately a fiend for drink, raiding the master's pantry for wine.

She, the "middle Theodora", felt somehow a balanced thing. She remembered little of her life as pompous high priestess; the man had taken that. She remembered little of the darkness of quiet spite, the woman had taken that.

What remained was literature, was poetry, was the music of words she'd so loved before accidentally falling into the political machine.

There was no discussion which of the three of them would make the journey to Gearheart.

The drunken woman wanted for the bliss moons, for the anaesthetic of debauchery. She left the next day by vexmule and did not write after that.

The man wanted for politics still and returned to the Meta-cluster, where he was shortly outed as part of Theodora's trifurcation and poisoned.

So it was the middle Theodora secured passage to Gearheart.

24.

Leo and Marta caught sight of neon lights in the distance. Ursula led them closer, and they passed into what had once been the commercial centre of Gearheart; now a maze of derelict buildings and makeshift restaurants.

They drew towards the racket of jolting polyrhythms and came upon the ruins of a basement bar. The sign above the steps read, *The Drunken Rabbit*.

They descended into tobacco smoke gloom so thick the patrons of the bar appeared to be apparitions. Many of the folk were already sleeping on tables. Many more were dancing, arms linked, red-nosed, feral-haired, falling over to be helped up again by their comrades.

A semi-naked man was dancing on a central table. His hair was dreadlocked down to his knees. Through the hair, Leo recognised the man as an older, crinkled Lepus. Beside him danced a woman, togaed, almost twice the man's height, also clearly drunk and with, Leo could not deny, the darting eyes of an owl.

The bar's music began to find its crescendo. Lepus raised a bottle and cried, "By Anaximander's golden dick we prostrate on the ground. Now what's the world made out of?"

The crowd replied, "For that we must peer down, down, down, down. . ."

Leo kicked over the music box and the music died. "Now who in the fuck—" Lepus yelled, and caught sight of Leo.

They stared at one another through the smoke for an infinite few seconds.

Lepus rubbed his eyes, then trudged unsteadily across the bar. He extended a swaying hand. "Well, his holiness has returned, and he looks as miserable as ever."

Leo threw a punch, laying Lepus flat and unmoving.

25.

Leo and Marta slept above *The Drunken Rabbit* in bedchambers the barman provided.

In the morning, Leo found a hungover Lepus in a dim living room, working on a bottle of something pink. He poured Leo a glass.

Leo muttered, "This tastes like peaches. We don't have peaches."

Lepus nodded. "Bodhi does though. We trade with them sometimes now."

Leo's eyes grew wide. Lepus put a hand up. "First things first. Before you beat me up a second time, Anaximander's dick, just let me do the talk.

I've been working on it damn near half a century."

Leo watched the yellowing, crumpled face before him, more wrinkles than relief.

Lepus said, "I appreciate you're probably a little miffed—"

"I'll fucking kill you."

"Now look. You did fine with Eleshnitsa; it got the Gearheart Confederation started. But we both knew alliances wouldn't be enough. Gearheart needed technological leaps, and for that they needed morale. And for morale, they needed a king that didn't die."

"I didn't *want* to be a king; I told you that over and over."

Lepus shrugged. "Didn't much matter what you wanted. You were about to get yourself killed walking among the plebs, or on another stupid test flight, or just drinking the days into a hole."

"Oh, drink, you'd know about that, wouldn't you?"

"I am an ex-god, your holiness. You are meat. Our livers are not to be compared."

"So you sabotaged the fleet's engines, dilated time for us."

Lepus said, "Sure."

"And you stole forty years of Gearheart history without the slightest thought."

"We were in a crisis."

"We are *still* in a crisis." Leo threw open the window. Cargo spheres were noiselessly rising into the air. Spyles were busying above the skyscrapers and townhouses, ferrying bags of currency and silverware. The streets were full of well-dressed folk walking among starving folk. Leo said, "Gods, it was just a few months ago for me. We were drab, sure, but we were going in the right direction." He yelled, "And what have you done to all of it? What have you done to Gearheart? What's this money fetish bullshit?"

Lepus muttered, "The kids got their candy and then candy was all they wanted."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Have another drink with me."

Leo threw the bottle out the window. “No, I will not have another damn drink with you. I won’t watch you nose this world into the ground. We were *building* something. We were *standing up* for something, you and me. Who are you now? Who is this sad old bastard?”

Madeleine appeared at the window with the bottle partially rebuilt. She deposited it on the table and exited.

They stared at the bottle a long time. It was empty now, shards missing, naught but a useless relic of something once functional.

“I tried,” Lepus said in an almost-whisper. “I tried my hardest, and it was going fine at first. The faculties were humming along all right, and Bodhi was enough of a threat to give us some sense of common purpose. I stuck to our plan, trained more and more scholars, built better and better vexboats.” He met Leo’s eyes. “I wish you could’ve seen the golden age. We had one, really we did. There was no poverty; Albena Patzela took care of that. There were no pointless jobs; I took care of that. Everyone worked on bivnik in the day and drank like fish at night. It was tug-o-war with Bodhi, and everyone down here was giving the rope a good, proper pull.”

“Doesn’t look so much like that now,” Leo said.

Lepus lit a cigarette, blew out a long, defeated plume of smoke and looked into the grey chaos of it. He said, “Societies are just like people. They have fears and hopes. They get self-hating, or impose exercise regimes, or turn to peach liqueur and piss the years away.” He took a small cylinder of crystal from his pocket. “This throws messages through Vex, can contact anyone else in the world at a moment’s notice.” He pushed his hair aside to reveal crystalline bumps on his neck. “These reduce blood from the frontal lobe when I say the right word, kill anxiety, boost creative thought—or that’s the idea.” He ran to the window, pointed to the bustling cargo spheres. “Those aren’t defying gravity, they’re bending it, warping spacetime overhead so that they’re falling *up* rather than down. Costs less to run than an internal combustion engine, and almost perfectly clean.” He produced a pocketknife and slit his palm. The blood ran down his wrist, treacled on the carpet. “I can be seen by a doctor in less than ten minutes, and they’ll use special little molecular bonds that mimic my own biology and fix the wound up in seconds, no scar.” His eyes shone wild. “The subway trains are never late. The snow comes in the winter and only lasts three days. You can buy wine that never leaves a hangover, asparagus that

never sours your piss, chocolate that never rots your teeth." He screamed out the window, "We are comfortable. Hark, damn you, we are comfortable and nothing will ever hurt again."

"Top speech, eleven out of ten," Leo said. "The 'Abundance Faculty' we saw, they had statues of Albena Patzela everywhere."

"Your noble queen of poverty, yes."

"Where is she now?"

Lepus nodded west, and Leo knew it was towards the cemetery. "She did well for a few years, got the homeless into homes, started welfare programs. But things changed soon enough. I only had to watch society going to gadgets and investment funds. She had to watch her friends kicked back out on the street, starving, rounded up. The turn was more than she could bear. She checked out. Overdose."

Leo thought, *Albena, I'm just so, so sorry.*

Dour, Lepus said, "Her son turned up from nowhere, Yanko, just an intern at the econ faculty. He got close with the technology scholars, steered a few of them away from the vexboat project, and towards entertainment gadgets and talking refrigerators, kept the patents for himself. I looked away a second, looked back, and the bastard was rich—rich enough to start his own side hustles, rich enough to build the damned *Abundance Faculty*, rich enough to drop flyers all over the city with his name and face." He prodded Leo sharply in the shoulder. "You try it, your holiness. You try to keep the bivnik train on track when some shaven-faced, silver-tongued bastard is promising everyone feather beds and personal vexboats. You try telling the public they have to stick to sleeping on thin mattresses and walking to work just long enough at least that we can kill bivnik. It wasn't the poor who revolted. It wasn't the rich who overran everything. It was the fat, satisfied middle class, and their fat, satisfied kids. There was no revolution. There was only the promise that revolutions would never happen again and everyone could carve out a comfy little space for themselves and talk to their fridge and own a crystal communicator if they only turned a blind eye to the end of the world. The kids tried candy, and then candy was all they wanted."

Leo poured vodka over Lepus' bleeding hand and tore off some curtain and wrapped it around the wound. Lepus murmured, "They didn't kick me off the councils, they just cancelled all my speeches and gave my office to

an intern. I couldn’t watch it all go to hell. I couldn’t be there for it, not when it got pointless to fight. I tried to keep it together for so long. I swear I did.”

“It’s all right.”

Lepus whispered, “Ursula died for nothing.”

A single tear fell down his cheek. Leo put his arms around the old man.

A long quiet. The sky had turned a dull afterthought of purple with the midday smog.

What straddles a dream and a nightmare? Leo thought. *There’s no word for the thing, the grey between hope and despair.*

That’s where we are now. That’s where we’ll live.

In the Overcast Middle of the World.

26.

For seventeen hours a day did Prince Hristo (or *Itzo*) sit upon his newmetal throne, Lord Mriga always beside.

One afternoon there came a poor woman from the southern wetlands of Bodhi. She was old as time, barely able to walk, even with a stick at her side.

She bowed before the prince. His orange, mandala eyes looked kindly down upon her.

An octopus stood guard, the Holy Court’s translator, converting the old woman’s words to Staritae for Itzo. It said, “Woman, make your request.”

“Venerable one,” the old woman said. “My two sons and daughter have been taken by moksha poisoning, such in close vicinity to the flowers did they live, for we were unable to find accommodation elsewhere. Not a month ago the fumes took my husband also. I ask only to live away from the flowers a while.” She attempted to prostrate on the ground before Itzo, but slipped and fell on her face. Itzo stood to help, but Mriga blocked him with a hoof. The old woman scrabbled about on the ground for some time, found her footing, and drew herself slowly back up.

The octopus converted the woman's words in the corrupt fashion Mriga had instructed long ago. It said to Itzo, ***Familial nature, explicit report.*** *The woman says her family died wise.*

Itzo said to the woman, ***Confused concern.*** *Your family died of wisdom?*

To the woman the octopus said, "The prince wishes to know if your family were wise before they died."

The woman stuttered in confusion. "I. . .suppose so, Lord Hristo."

The translator reported to Itzo, ***Benevolent thanks.*** *Yes, they died wise. She only comes to thank you for such.*

Itzo replied, ***Benevolent gratitude.*** *I require no thanks from you. My wish is that you are happy.*

The translator said, "The prince bids you good day. Go in peace."

The old woman stared in horror. She went to open her mouth, but the octopus rang a bell and said once again, "Go in peace."

The old woman left the throne room.

On her descent back through La Geometrica Familia, she paused at a balcony and threw herself over.

27.

From her workstation in the port, Hisarya watched the old woman falling. She listened to the scream a while, then the silence after the scream.

A caravan of seers approached, bowing to Hisarya.

"Where are you bound?" she said.

"Nebeto, Empress. . ." A seerlady murmured. She peered up at Hisarya, watching with the same expression all folk seemed to these days, one that said clearly, *True you are the empress, but now you direct traffic?*

Hisarya cleared her mind and launched the caravan through Vex, disappearing them in an instant.

She bent to rub her newmetal cuff. It had been too tight for years now.

More travellers approached.

"My lady," they said.

“Yes,” Hisarya murmured. She turned back to La Geometrica Familia, struggling to catch sight of her son.

As always, she spotted nothing but granite.

28.

Come the next day and the Gearheart folk continued to celebrate the fleet’s return. Hovering platforms shot blue and gold smoke over the lunchtime sky. Folk approached constantly to fuss over Leo and Marta, and pat Madeleine’s casing.

In the afternoon, Ursula led the two natives and their spyle to the cellar of Scholar’s Tower, to the old archives.

The archivist appeared barely out of school. He bowed to Leo and politely explained that the archives were off-limits to anyone but Yanko Patzel.

“Why?” Leo said.

“Those are my orders.”

“I am Dean Leo Tereshkov. Is there an authority above mine?”

The archivist only smiled and said, “Those are my orders.”

Ursula pushed the archivist aside. Leo, Marta, and Madeleine barged past, the archivist screaming wildly for the guards.

Once inside the archive, Ursula pushed a bookshelf up against the door.

They wandered about the stacks, Madeleine bursting into dust and assimilating what she could, returning every few minutes with progressively stranger revelations.

So it seemed twenty years ago, with the advent of *electrotopology theory*, that some pseudo-form of anti-gravity had been perfected. This gave way to personal transport vehicles, which gave way to a growing need for power.

The energy companies came next.

The lobbyists came after that.

Private laboratories began springing up across the planet; theoreticians defecting from the university and to the corporations—paid handsomely,

revered well.

Then anti-ageing drugs. Then personal communication devices. Then protective fourspace visitation equipment.

Innovation quickened, and its goals fractured. While bivnik aversion had once been the primary goal of Gearheart's technological climb, the aim soon became better entertainment, better animal rearing, better law enforcement, better social control, and better shoe soles.

Madeleine returned with the minutes of speech after speech of Lepus'—first attempting to inspire scholars to return to the primary cause of bivnik aversion, then pleading.

On each occasion, fewer scholars attended the meetings, citing lateness, citing resignation from their posts.

A man from the Gearheart Central Bank insisted government control was too regulatory, and the bank should be able to set the interest rate of the world.

A woman from the crystal-electronics laboratories insisted that the institutions could make much greater profits if they were allowed to become private corporations, rather than an arm of the university.

Soon enough, bivnik was forgotten.

When Madeleine was quite finished, she descended into Leo's lap and they watched the lazy afternoon dust.

At least we've reached the bottom, Leo thought. *At least it can't worsen now.*

Marta appeared with a stack of old parchment. "Ursula found these; vexboat reports, more than a decade old."

Leo read in exhausted horror.

GAMMA-VEX BROADCAST DETECTED COURTESY OF TRAWLER BOAT EUCLID 9.

SIGNAL ORIGINATING FROM SECTOR 2623G, 8KPC DISTANT.

DECODE RESULT: **MAITREYA.**

SIGNAL REPEATS AD INFINITUM.

29.

The meeting was held on the fifty-sixth floor of what had once been called Scholar's Tower. Robed and bejewelled administrative officials shuffled in with their spyles, poured themselves coffee, and checked their crystal devices over and over.

Yanko entered finally, half an hour late, and the folk stood and bowed so low their noses almost kissed the marble table.

As he was about to begin the financial projections report, the corridor sounded with shouts.

Lepus, Leo, Marta, Theodora, and Madeleine burst into the meeting room, trailed by guards.

Yanko said, "Sirs, I don't believe I've scheduled an audience with you."

"They overpowered us. . ." a guard murmured.

Lepus said, "You all fight like fucking mice."

The administrative officials cried out in horror and made to leave.

Leo said, "No one's going anywhere."

They deferred to Yanko. Yanko thought a moment, smiled diplomatically, and gestured to the empty chairs. "Please. Join us then."

The guards exited. Leo and his companions sat. Leo said, "Before I begin, I would like to confirm my status with your kind self, Mr Patzel. I am the dean of Gearheart University, is that correct?" Yanko nodded. A few of the administrative folk exchanged nervous glances. "And, as a result, I am technically the head of the Campus Major, and consequently the world, is that correct?"

"Yes. . ." Yanko said.

"Then may I ask why I was not immediately made aware, upon my return, that the last Maitreya signal was detected more than *ten years ago*? May I also ask why my colleague and deputy Dr Lepus was not made aware of this at the time of its detection?"

Yanko pouted. "I am not sure what it is you're referring to."

Madeleine exploded into a pulsing waveform, purring the signal's beat over and over.

Yanko said, "It was not deemed of importance."

Leo said, “I thought you didn’t know what we’re referring to?”

“It took a moment to recall.” Yanko raised his hands in a placating gesture. “Sir, I understand Gearheart has changed in your absence. I will of course do my best to reintegrate you into the state of things, but you must understand that our values have progressed a great deal.”

“I left *specific instructions* behind that if the final signal was detected, a science fleet would be dispatched immediately to its confirmed origin.”

Yanko bowed ironically to Lepus. “Perhaps if your colleague hadn’t spent quite so much time in the bars of Cyan then we may have remembered to action this request.”

Lepus said formally, “Eat my dick.”

The administrative folk gasped. Several stood to leave again. Leo barked, “Sit the hell down. All of you.” They paused mid-ascent. “I built this tower and you’ll sit the hell down.” They sat slowly. “What my friends and I find particularly disturbing is that the evidence of the signal was buried in the archive cellars. Had Dr Tereshkova and Ursula not chanced upon it, we’d have been none the wiser. Far be it from me to make accusations, but it’s almost as though someone tried to squirrel the signal away, lest it come to the public’s attention.”

Yanko said, “There was no *squirrelling* at work here, sir. To my knowledge the information was not considered relevant to society in any way. The signal could easily have originated from a neutron star. It bears no mark of intelligence.”

Leo scanned the room for any sign of support and found only blank stares, many directed at little crystal devices.

Yanko said, “The point is moot anyway, Dr Tereshkov. It’s no secret you believe your prophet is dwelling at the edge of the galaxy. . .”

“I’ve never once said Anaximander himself waits there. But if it’s possible there’s technology or theoretics on Annica that can pull us back from the brink of bivnik, we should take the thing seriously, because the brink is damn well where we are now. You’ve let this whole society go to hell. You’ve all completely lost your way. We should send vexboats to the origin of the signals at once. We are fast running out of time.”

Yanko chuckled politely. “Oh please, sir. After ideology, doomsaying was the next vice we dispensed with.”

“Bodhi is eating worlds, eating *suns.*”

Yanko said, “Their political choices are of no concern to us, nor could we influence them if they were. We provide them with theoretics, and they price their commodities fairly.”

Leo leaned across the table, lowered his voice to formal flatness. “Here’s what’s going to happen next. I will immediately resume my role as dean incumbent of Gearheart University. My ship *The Johannes* and its sister boats will be refitted with the cutting edge of your recent technological advances. Marta and Dr Lepus will assume control of the fleet. Two weeks from now the fleet will leave for the source of the signal, accompanied by several thousand of your finest military personnel, if you still even have a military left. Meanwhile I’ll remain here and begin the long process of bringing Gearheart back on track to resisting bivnik. If your strategic data are to be believed, Bodhi has claimed no less than one hundred thousand worlds since our departure to Eleshnitsa, and there’s no sign of that slowing. The Devan Union will collapse shortly, and while some worlds are flocking to Gearheart, we are losing the fight with consummate apathy.

“I notice that Bodhi is about to celebrate its centenary festival of *Sangha*. I will invite them to engage in debate with Gearheart to celebrate the event, and suggest that the debates are broadcasted to the entire galaxy. If Bodhi is publicly challenged, they won't dare refuse for fear of appearing weak. We will show the collapsing Union worlds that Gearheart is a superior project to Bodhi, and sway them to our cause. And we will shortly *remember* our cause. Namely, the forestalling of bivnik. That was always the central mission of Gearheart. It resumes again, immediately. Do you have any questions?”

There was a long silence of stares and open mouths. Yanko said, “I think we should call a vote on this action.”

“No,” Leo said.

“I think we should vote on whether we call a vote.”

“No, Mr Patzel, we will not. If you check the Gearheart constitution you will find it explicitly written that the dean of Gearheart is kept in check only by the Supreme Court of Gearheart, and you will recall you disbanded the court thirteen years ago so as to push through your anti-regulation reforms. Furthermore, my daughter found another strange item in the archives. There

is no record of Albena Patzela ever having a son. Would you care to explain this discrepancy?"

Yanko's demeanour did not falter. He said, "Perhaps you should look deeper into the archives. I am not responsible for your shoddy research methods. And to the bivnik matter, many are happy with their way of life here, Dr Tereshkov. Your plans will meet only resistance. My sincerest apologies."

Leo said, "I couldn't give a damn. I was granted my position by the great scientist Ursula Tereshkova, with the explicit purpose of forestalling galactic resource depletion. I intend to make good on that mandate."

Yanko said coldly, "Then I will return to the Abundance Faculty and await your orders, sir."

"It is called the *Bivnistics Faculty*, and since you neither hold a degree, nor are you a researcher, Mr Patzel, I regret to report that you are out of a job."

30.

Leo went from faculty to faculty firing anyone refusing to return to a bivnik-centred Gearheart.

It was not a pleasant task, though he quietly enjoyed watching the more ostentatious folk packing up their trophies and business certificates and vacating their offices.

Some semblance of the theoretical faculties still existed, meeting usually to discuss abstract matters in the Cyan bars. Leo burst into the meetings and hired all the lapsed academics he could find; assigning them to the reopening of the Bivnistics Faculty.

The mathematical plates of the *bivnik schema* were dusted off and displayed once again. The old bivniscopes were unveiled and retrained on the stars.

The light of Gearheart appeared lit once more.

31.

The evening before the Gearheart fleet was to set off for Annica, Leo rode a bivnik across town to his old office.

Beyond the window was the constant pulse of vehicles leaving for the sky, returning from the sky; leaving, returning, leaving, returning. . .

Had life grown harsher, or had he only grown more sensitive to life's harshnesses?

Those mornings in Bodhi, just after sunup, Hisarya and Ursula and Johannes yet to rise from bed; Leo had liked to look out from his bedroom window at the sun rising up over the land and painting everything in light. The mornings were a promise that all was forgiven of the day before and all was possible in the day approaching—Mama with her hugs and geometry, Papa with his hugs and wisdom, and the world a cushioned nest to stomp about in, an adventure and a lesson all at once.

The waning sun pulled shadows across Gearheart now as some heavy duvet swaddling a sleeper in bed, and the courtyards went to black and the libraries became as crypts.

In the distance, Leo spied a lone bivnik, its silhouette pausing here and there to forage in the grass. Its tusk had looped almost all the way back around to its forehead and would shortly pierce the skull.

Leo twiddled incompetently with the crystal communication device a scienceman had given him, and at last Lepus picked up. His voice was slurred, inebriated. "What is it? I'm packed for tomorrow."

"Good," Leo said. "But I'm not calling for that."

"What, want one last drink together before we say the big goodbye, you and I?"

"We're not having a goodbye. I'm coming with you to Annica."

"Your holiness, consider the logistics of that. There'll be no dean left behind."

"Marta will take over."

Lepus paused. Soberly: "You've asked her?"

"No."

Theodora sleepily muttered something in the background. Lepus muttered something crude back.

“Just meet me at the spaceport in an hour,” Leo said.

“An *hour*? You said we weren’t leaving until midday tomorrow.”

“The plan has changed.”

He hung up.

He put on some ancient Earth music, all strings and sad chords, and drank for a while.

Marta must be sleeping, he thought. *Else sat up in bed unable to put a book down, all big dark eyes and questions, and the last living spark of hope from the old times when Gearheart had a north star.*

He ripped off a new piece of letter parchment. The inkwell was near empty, but there’d be just enough.

Marta,

You’re no doubt very angry. That’s fair enough. I’ve left without you, there’s no gentle way to put that. I knew you’d never stay behind if I asked. I also know that a letter won’t make you forgive me, but at least it might explain why I’ve done this. Seeing you grow into the woman you’ve become has been a process of contradiction. I’m filled constantly with pride at watching you keeping the torch of bivnik lit, keeping the core principles close. Every day, I’m in awe at your natural ability to see the world as it is, not what you want it to be. Yet every day, I am reminded of just how irrelevant I’ve become compared to you. It’s not jealousy, only an evermore poignant reminder of how I should’ve given up the throne long ago.

I am no longer fit to serve as the dean of Gearheart University. I have no new ideas and no passion left to implement them anyway. But you are still young, and clever, and dynamic. You can still feel the zeitgeist. Whether you like it or not, this is your time now.

Dr Tereshkova, it is with great pleasure that I can confirm you have been selected as the new dean of Gearheart University, to begin in the position with immediate effect. I hereby deed you my properties, titles, and academic privileges in full. Much like having a child, you are about to learn that your life is rather small and fleeting. You live for the people of Gearheart now,

children as they have become. You live to protect them and fight for their endurance. You live to kill the black star of bivnik before it eats everything.

In some universe next door where everything is the same but for minor discrepancies, I did not become your father. Some almost-identical version of myself is sat at some almost-identical desk right now with a great hole in his heart he never found the occasion to fill, because he never found anything to be proud of, or to love. But I have been lucky enough to live in this universe where this man has something to be proud of, and to love, and she is the brightest and kindest daughter any father was ever blessed to have.

I will be watching from the heavens as I take a slower road. I will be thinking of you every hour of every day. I will come back to you decades from now with Anaximander's technological miracles and marvel at the new world you have built. I only pray that by then you have found some way not to hate me.

Be kind, and when you can't be kind, be fair. And when you can't be fair, be clever. And when you can't be clever, please be kind again.

I am prouder of you than words allow description.

Always above,

Yours,

Papa.

IX

Scandalised by dying evening, the dragons retreat to their nest.
Only ashes await them there.

Excerpts from **The Collected Prose of Lady Theodora**

1.

The week after Leo left, Marta shut herself in her private chambers.

By night she watched a sparkling, white point of light in the sky that was *The Johannes* and the fleet. Soon it winked to nothing.

Now and then folk came to the door attempting to initiate the deaning procedure. Marta only responded that she was unwell.

Next they came to inform her that Bodhi had accepted the Sangha debate invitation. She only responded that she was unwell.

By the tenth day she knew the fleet must be two solar systems distant, her father ageing at one-tenth her own pace now.

She read and reread Leo's letter. She ripped it up and threw it in the fire.

"Madam, the debates. . ." came the call beyond the door again.

She stopped answering.

She drank a great deal and watched the Cyan district in the far distance. She could just make out the outline of the nest of shacks she'd grown up in.

I am an orphan again.

2.

Early one morning Yanko came to the door.

"Dr Tereshkova, I just want you to know it's all right if you abdicate."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course. No one would think less of you."

I could take a little vexboat to the bliss moons, she thought. *I'd be a stranger.* She said, "Who would be next in line for the deanhood?"

"Well, technically you have no family on the planet, so it would go to the highest-ranking official."

"You?"

“We can get to that later. The thing is entirely your decision, of course, but I want you to know I would take the position very seriously.”

“I see.”

Yanko said, “The thing is, it’s probably best if you make your mind up today.”

“Why?”

“Because Bodhi has scheduled the first Sangha debate for this evening. Just let me know if—”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

She heard him shifting from foot to foot beyond the door. “It’s not anything to be concerned about.”

“Is someone from Bodhi coming here?”

“No, the debates will take place on the broadcasting network. Look, I’m getting training from a high-scholar at the Psychology Faculty already, I’m prepared.”

Marta knitted her thumbs. “Who’s arguing on the Bodhi side?”

“Mriga. Empress Jetsunma is indisposed, apparently.”

“I see.”

“I have it all under control.”

“Yeah.”

3.

The Gearheart fleet consisted of seventeen vexboats, totalling around three thousand crew.

Some boats were misshapen, of the former Gearheart era when function won over form; others of the recent era when form and function had learned to share a bed together.

Leading the fleet was Leo’s vexboat, *The Johannes*, and Lepus’ scruffy, converted trawler, *The Irate Librarian.*

The Johannes had been extended by almost a thousand feet, a glittering behemoth. The ship span fast enough to create artificial gravity for the crew.

As such, there was no official *ground*, only walls one could walk up and ceilings one could run across.

Gearheart adding machines were still not advanced enough to plot a perfect course through fourspace. Every now and then, the fleet fell out of Vex for a while to reorient, *The Johannes'* navigator putting a sextant to the stars.

The crew would rush to the window of their respective crafts, gaze out at the once again recognisable stars, then gradually slink back to work as the fleet resumed a course in extra-dimensional weirdness.

Slowly, Annica neared.

It was during the third day of the journey that Lepus and Leo toured the boats with the quartermaster. The quartermaster demonstrated the railguns, the masers, and the torpedoes. Leo and Lepus nodded dully.

Their eyes grew wide, however, upon a visit to the heart of *The Johannes.*

There span a whirling device of metal rings. Within the rings was a light too bright to look at directly, shivering with the intensity of a candle in a draft.

The quartermaster referred only to the device as a *braidbomb*. Once detonated, the machine could allegedly break the electromagnetic bonds of any molecules in a radius of twenty thousand miles. Not even dust would remain.

"Why the hell is this here?" Leo said.

"Collateral," the quartermaster said. "Each major ship in the fleet has one."

"Well, what do we need with a doomsday button then?"

"Market forces," the quartermaster said. "Gearheart Arms Corporation was being repeatedly bested by its competitors. The research and development department decided to build a device that would literally destroy the competition."

"But we'd never use this, surely?"

The quartermaster handed Leo and Lepus a set of keys. "That is at your discretion, sirs."

Situated at the "top" of *The Johannes* was a vexlock, a pressurised door leading into fourspace. Leo liked to sit nearby and work on bivnik

calculations, clandestinely watching crew passing in and out of the dimensional door for maintenance work.

He longed to throw himself through the vexlock, to become one again, if just for a moment, with those impossible, singing geometries of fourspace.

Marta had not written. It must have been two weeks since his leaving, from her perspective on Gearheart.

He did not believe in deities, but still he prayed she would come around.

4.

Gearheart University's Great Hall was bursting with academics; all seats taken, many more folk watching from the antechambers.

Yanko sat before a crystal microphone, dressed in his gold ambassadorial robes. He hushed the crowd with a hand. "Scholars and layfolk," he said. "It is my unfortunate duty to inform you that Dr Tereshkova is rather grief-stricken with the departure of her father. And so, the duty falls to me to represent our world in this, the first Bodhi-Gearheart debate."

Cynical whispers sparked. Someone yelled, "Have you been made dean?"

"The traditional cut-off for Dr Tereshkova's decision is several hours from now. I will be assuming the role in official capacity as of then."

More whispers.

Yanko cleared his throat, affected a sweet smile. "I'm sure Dr Tereshkova will return to public life in one form or another. However, I can promise that, as dean, I will put the economy and the financial protection of Gearheart at the forefront of policy." An engineer reported the fourspace link to Bodhi had been established. Yanko said, "Well then. Let the debate begin."

"Wait," Marta called, appearing at the back of the hall and wearing pyjamas. She climbed the stage. "I accept," she said. "I accept the position of dean of Gearheart University."

A confused silence from the crowd.

Then clapping.

Then cheers.

“This is not the proper deaning procedure,” Yanko snapped into her ear.

“I have accepted. That is the procedure.”

She stared Yanko down.

From the crowd, Ursula yelled, “Long live Dean Marta!” The crowd cheered louder still.

Yanko rose, bowed as slightly as possible, and offered his chair.

Marta whispered to an aide, “Can you fetch me some cigarettes?”

“I’m not sure that’ll look very dean-like,” the aide said.

“Please.”

Cigarettes and tea were delivered before Marta. She attempted to tidy her hair, then lit a cigarette. Many of the crowd lit up in solidarity.

The hall projector illuminated. A glittering kaleidoscope of interstellar signal noise commenced, then resolved finally into a coherent picture.

On a prayer cushion sat Lord Mriga, eyes closed in meditation, antlers decked in silver, a wreathed crown of diamond upon his head.

The broadcast beamed out beyond the Gearheart Confederation worlds, out beyond the Bodhi Empire, across the remains of the Devan Union, reaching even the most distant, neutral planets. Devas and natives alike gawped up before their displays and dust-images; a pyjamaed, smoking woman of pale face and dishevelled hair opposite an ancient and unblinking deer god.

Leo, Lepus, and Theodora sat before the projector in the library of *The Johannes*.

“Is that her official dean look now?” Lepus asked.

“I hope so,” Leo said. *Be wonderful, darling*, he thought.

The galaxy fell silent.

5.

When the introductions were completed and Marta was three cigarettes in, the off-screen moderator said, “To the first point of order then. As you know, many worlds of the collapsing Devan Union are currently undecided in their allegiances, torn between the religiosity of Bodhi, and the rationality of Gearheart. It might be best to begin with each empire’s foundational beliefs. Dean Tereshkova, you maintain that the so-called *bivnik effect* is an existential threat to all civilised life in the galaxy, is that correct?”

Marta said quietly, “The data are clear about this, yes.”

“And Venerable Lord Mriga, is it correct that you oppose this position?”

Mriga opened his eyes, spoke in a warm and personable voice. “There is no argument *to* oppose. How many times throughout the history of galactic empire has doomsday been prophesied? And how many times has the dreaded date arrived, only for the devotees of those death-cults to find civilisation still in existence?”

Marta said, “How can you compare a hundred different historical examples and claim they have anything to do with our current situa—”

Mriga cut in, “The galaxy is thriving, economically and spiritually. The Bodhi colonies are pushing out further and further into space, filling the void with the light of civilisation. Natives are living longer. Native-Devan relations are better than they’ve ever been. Do you dispute these facts, Dean Tereshkova?”

“You’ve taken one hundred thousand worlds by force. Maybe we can ask the natives and Devas of those worlds how they feel about your golden age.”

Mriga’s eyes did not waver. “Many were displeased with their treatment at the hands of the Devan Union. We have incorporated only those worlds into our empire that wished to join.”

“Incorporated? Sir, I think you mean *enslaved.* You hold them ransom with the threat of withdrawing moksha.”

The moderator said, “If we could stick to the topic of the bivnik effect for just a moment more.”

“All right, let’s do that,” Marta said. “Over sixty percent of all viable stars have now been stripped of stoyanium-32, and are dying or dead. Meanwhile, the galactic population is rising exponentially. Gearheart has

tried to slow the stoyanium mining crisis by popularising vexboats, but Bodhi appears to have no interest in making the switch to technological fourspace travel. We appreciate it may be a daunting prospect for a Deva to give up their ability to manipulate the world in Vex, but it is a necessary sacrifice that must be made for our children's children."

Mriga said warmly, "Madam, it sounds as though you're advocating not sacrifice, but the tyranny of the few over the many. Bodhi's success stands on its advocation of personal liberty over legislative despotism. We would never ask our citizens or congregation to sacrifice their way of life for some obscure, ideological pity grab."

Marta took several deep breaths, lit another cigarette. Finding her kinder voice she said, "Sir, every time you have been presented with the scientific data for bivnik over the years, you haven't responded to the data, but to some supposed ideological motivation that exists only in your head. I would be more than happy to show the figures and future projections to you." She leant towards the optical crystal, said, "We have less than one millennium left before bivnik runs out of control. In that time we must either adopt an alternative, safe mode of expansion that doesn't deplete resources at a breakneck pace—vexboats, in other words—or Bodhi, Gearheart, and the Devan Union will find themselves living in a galaxy without energy. No recovery is possible after that. If you want to distort this call to action as some attempt to control your way of life, then you're likely the sort of person who lets their own house burn down just to spend a few more minutes in bed."

Mriga bowed his head ceremoniously. "Friends, on whichever world you call your home, is fear the rhetoric of a leader? Is this how the Golden One would've spoken?"

Marta's eyes grew wide. "Data," she said. "Please respond to the *data*. If you want to pull the religious card there, remember that Anaximander preached moderation, preached protection of one's environment. He must be rolling in Nibbana at your defilement of him. How is the unrestricted gobbling of every resource in the galaxy anything close to the middle-way he advocated?"

Mriga said, "Fear-peddling is an attempt at control. Do not be tricked by this hysteria; she only wishes for your submission. It's no secret that Gearheart longs for the persecution of the religious. They know spirituality

is a facet of life they cannot control. Crush religion in the heart, they believe, and they crush the heart itself."

"The *data*. What do you have to say in response to the *data*?"

Mriga said, "Science has never been, and will never be, a solution to the problems societies face. Science holds itself in the highest esteem as the system of discovery by which the world will reveal itself. And yet. . ." He raised a hoof and fractal light emanated from it. Above his diamond crown bloomed blue flames. He said in echoing vexspeech, "It is the mind by which the Devas acquired their power. Science only comes trailing after like a yapping, spoiled dog."

Someone from the Politics Faculty slipped Marta a piece of parchment. It read: *They won't favour who's right, they'll favour who's more collected.*

Marta composed herself. "Where is Empress Jetsunma, my lord?"

Mriga said, "She is currently unwell."

"I see. Perhaps you can tell us what her official stance on bivnik is."

"She believes, as I do, that it is a Gearheart conspiracy, concocted to destroy Bodhi's bright future. Her insight is perfect at all times, and so her opinions are perfect by extension."

"That is a religious justification, sir. . ."

"It certainly is," Mriga said. "Religion is the lifeblood of all things. And when you too have read the scriptures thoroughly and joined our cause, you will understand what children you are."

"No, sir," Marta said. "I'm afraid we are at least attempting to behave as adults in this ridiculous age. Adults do not try to scare, but inform. And if it is your position that informing the public of the threat we face is *fear-mongering*, then we are already past the point of any possible dialogue. What possible political benefit could there be in asking the galaxy to moderate itself? How could Gearheart *possibly* stand to gain from that? We are simply requesting that Bodhi slows in its expansion, or at least foregoes using stoyanium-32 from now on. You are more than welcome to adopt our safe, tested mode of fourspace travel. We will provide you with hundreds of vexboats, free of charge."

Mriga said, "My friends, of Gearheart, of Bodhi, of the Devan Union, listen to the nub of her request. Surrender your way of life, your dignity,

your potency, all in favour of my baseless theoretics. Madam, you accuse Bodhi of tyranny, but it seems you are the tyrant here."

Marta said, "You haven't responded to a single point with anything but spiritual ramblings."

"One doesn't argue with children, but only waits for them to mature."

Many light-years distant, Lepus began to urinate on the projector screen.

6.

Upon waking the next day, Marta learned with quiet pride that several hundred ex-Devan Union worlds had officially requested membership of the Gearheart Confederation after viewing the debate. She gladly accepted them in.

She learned with quiet rage that almost twenty thousand worlds had defected to the Bodhi Empire.

In the afternoon, she was inaugurated as dean in a private ceremony, only Yanko and several officials present.

Next, she commandeered one of the old lecture halls as her strategy headquarters for the coming debates and set up a bamboo bed so she could sleep there without having to return to her bedchamber. Political strategists and metapsychologists began to advise her day and night, bickering amongst themselves on matters of *the shadow*, and *narrative archetypes.*

The old argumentative furore of Gearheart decades previous had returned, the geniuses *pissing nonsense* once more.

Marta was just glad to hear no mention of finance and economics.

A crowd of technologists came one morning and fitted Marta with a fourspace vexoskeleton—for her protection, they said, should assassins attend the debates.

She learned to manipulate the machine with her hands and feet, the sensation a curious one, being lifted into the air by stilts unseen, floating on apparently nothing. She also learned to reach across the room and pierce targets with the robotic fourspace arms, to explode vases and lampshades on a whim.

Well, she thought. *I can see why Devas enjoy this.*

A spyle was always on duty in the strategy headquarters to present the various switching allegiances of the galaxy as a dust-image above; the fickle blinks of worlds defecting Gearheart-bound or Bodhiwards. So too did the image present the galaxy in bivnik-view, the coloured hues of galactic resources vanishing.

The inner galaxy—the Meta-cluster and its neighbour worlds—were turning to deep orange already, their stars dying or dead.

Beyond them, the dreaming worlds were a lacklustre green, just centuries from depletion.

And out further, to the middling empty, to the rational worlds, to Gearheart and its newly defected sisters, even among the healthy blue of the surviving stars, many were beginning to show signs of the end.

7.

Marta woke one evening to a furore at the strategy headquarters. Ursula was trying to gain admittance, held back by the guards.

“Let her in please; she’s a friend,” Marta called. The guards reluctantly stood back and Ursula joined Marta’s bedside.

“I’m sorry to come to you so late, madam,” Ursula said.

“Please let’s dispense with madam-ing. Is everything all right?”

Ursula presented a gigantic tome of bound parchment. “I am chronicling,” she said. “Gearheart history, I mean. I think it’s safe to say this will be a crucial period.”

“Let’s hope there’s someone left to read the histories one day. . .” Marta murmured.

“Let’s. If it isn’t an imposition, I hoped you might let me take your handprint. For posterity.”

Marta agreed and let her hand be covered in ink and pressed into a page of parchment. She withdrew her hand to find other prints already present and labelled: Leo’s, Theodora’s, and Lepus’.

Taking up a quill, Ursula said, “Now, would it be all right if I asked you a few questions?”

Marta answered as best as she could, about her birth parents, about Leo, about the journey to Eleshnitsa. She watched Ursula’s frantic scribbles, wondering who or what those scribbles would one day be read by.

Finally, the questioning over, Marta called for some tea and the two of them sat and watched the scholars all bustling about in preparation for the next debate. Marta said, “I’ve been thinking of asking you for days, what’s it like having two deities for parents?”

“Oh, they’d both trifurcated into humans by the time I was born. They fight now and then, though not as badly as when they were still Devas, of course. My mother could never stand my father in his original form, too aloof and alcoholic. My father could never stand my mother as a Deva, too bossy and proper. They met in the middle, I suppose.”

Marta looked inside of herself for some division or delineation in her own character where love and hate met, where boredom and curiosity divorced. She could only find one single, amorphous Marta. She said, “I don’t trust anyone here; they’re too alien compared to my time. You remind me of my father, and you wear his mother’s name. Will you stay at my side for the next debates?”

“Of course.”

Marta took Ursula’s hand and pressed it into the parchment of the chronicles. “There,” she said. “Now you’re a part of history too.”

8.

The second Sangha debate. Marta attended once again in her pyjamas.

The ritual greetings out of the way, the moderator said, “Lord Mriga, Dean Tereshkova, it is no secret that the question of religion has been a contentious one these last few years. Dean Tereshkova, could I ask what your stance on the importance of religion is?”

Marta said carefully, “All citizens of Gearheart, Bodhi, and the Devan Union alike should be free to follow whichever faith they choose. Could I ask what this has to do with the bivnik effect?”

“Everything,” Mriga intoned.

“Sir, if you would,” the moderator said.

Mriga closed his eyes. “Religion is the basis of all action. Why do we have children, cultivate gardens, build empires? These are religious behaviours finding their way out of our hearts via practical action, the attempt to ground oneself through agency in the world. Religion is the motor of galactic civilisation.”

“Wait,” Marta said. “You’ve just defined religion as something so broad it could include everything.”

“It is everything, madam.”

“Is it diarrhoea?”

Ursula sniggered at Marta’s side.

“Madam. . .” Mriga said.

“Is it diarrhoea or not? If you want to claim everything is holy, or energy, or whatever you’re peddling, that’s fine, but *everything* includes diarrhoea and murder and being *un*religious too.”

“If you insist, then yes. Those who don’t believe in a higher power are religious without knowing it. They are fundamentalists in their fight against fundamentalism.”

Marta attempted to channel her irritation through the delicate lighting of a cigarette. “Sir, if I played this same game and told you everyone is secretly an *atheist* for all the thousands of dead gods they *don’t* believe in, you’d think I was being quite silly, no?”

“Foolish, certainly.”

“How is your argument any different?”

The moderator cut in, “I’ll draw you back to the original question if I may. How is religion important to a society? And could a society exist without it?”

“Absolutely not,” Mriga said. “Everything a society does is constructed on top of foundational values. Without those values there are no storehouses, no factories, no starships. A society derives its values from its faith. Our faith is in Anaximander’s teachings. Gearheart’s faith is in the scientific method.”

“The scientific method isn’t built on *faith*,” Marta murmured.

Mriga put up a hoof. “But it is. Madam, you and the rational millions upon your world claim the scientific method is free of value judgements and spirit; isn’t that correct?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’m sure you’d also claim that the local strength of gravity does not change based on one’s religious proclivities, no?”

“Of course.”

“However, if I were to ask you what *constructed* the scientific method, what *drives* the will to unmask reality in the first place, can you lead me to a scientific model of *that*?”

Marta glanced quickly to Ursula. She shrugged. Marta said, “Well, if we’re being technical about it, our interests derive from our minds, and our minds derive from our brains.”

“I see. So, in essence, you long to know how the world works because one synapse activated in a certain way, one neuron fired in a certain way and so on?”

“To put it simply, yes.”

Mriga bent his head pityingly. “What do our watching friends across the galaxy make of this assessment, I wonder. Love and curiosity, courage and goodness, all just electricity running riot in a little gelatinous, grey adding machine within the skull. It’s hard to imagine a more degrading narrative.”

“Sir, we don’t select truth claims based on *preference*, or whether they make us comfortable. We select them based on whether or not they’re right, and adapt accordingly.”

Mriga ignored her. “Moreover, aside from your sterile worldview, how can one know right from wrong without a spiritual model? What reason is there not to steal and violate, to kill and maim, if we do not have a higher objective morality to which to appeal, if the world is merely matter and fields? As the ancient adage goes, without a divine eye watching, all things are permitted. A society without religion is a society without a future.”

Marta said, “Except for all those hundreds of spiritually neutral worlds even in the Devan Union who have followed no religious code for two thousand years and are still prosperous and peaceful.”

“They will collapse eventually,” Mriga said with a sniff.

Marta said, “Oh *come on*. Look, I really didn’t want to get drawn into this line of argument, but firstly, you’re one of the most murderous empires that has existed in native and Devan history, so belief in the *holy above* doesn’t appear to be working out brilliantly for you. I’m sorry if you don’t find the scientific method compelling enough, but that does nothing to stop it being the correct mode of inquiry. Second, apologies, but what’s wrong with deriving one’s moral code from reason and compassion?”

“There would be no reason or compassion without religion.”

“Nonsense, sir,” Marta said. “I choose not to harm because I know what it is to be harmed, and I’d rather not inflict it on my kin or friends or society. I don’t have to be commanded to do so. I choose to. If I behaved well just because I’d been told to, with the threat of hell or what have you, that isn’t really good behaviour at all, but a celestial hostage situation.”

Mriga countered, “Yet, if there is no divine story around which to orient your behaviour, who’s to say your moral code is any better than a thief or a murderer’s?”

“Pain is objective. A papercut is a papercut whether Anaximander divined it so or not. A society’s primary maxim should be to inflict the least suffering possible.”

Mriga murmured, “And yet, time and time again, we’ve seen that societies cannot persist in longevity without living for a story of something beyond ourselves, something in the great *beyond us*.”

“I have already referenced the Devan worlds that do not believe in the literal interpretation of Anaximander’s teachings, yet still survive to this day. You seem to have selective hearing.”

“I heard you fine, madam; it was only that your point had no legs.”

Ursula slipped Marta a piece of parchment. *Attack his fundamentalism. He won’t be able to back down.* Marta said, “Sir, you and your oshos claim that we needn’t believe whether Anaximander *truly* levitated, or performed feats of mindreading, it is only important that we make use of the moral of the stories; is that correct?”

“That is correct.”

“Well, it seems rather patronising, I must say, to assume that men and women and Devas can’t live peacefully and prosperously without believing in a story which *may* or *may not* be true. If the gospel of Anaximander is

true, then prove it to us, please. If it isn't true, it's a good story, but why not believe in any other story one fancies at the time? My friend Theodora is an excellent poet; her verse is full of moral lessons. Perhaps you'd like to command your population to believe in those instead. Their veracity is just as valid if everything is all just a fiction."

Far away, within *The Johannes*, Lepus gave Theodora a wink.

Marta continued, "Also, sir, there are plenty of other religious narratives in our history still alive and well today. It's curious that you advocate we need a narrative of some kind, then only advocate for the one *you* favour, much like the man who steals your watch, then tries to sell it back to you. What about the pebble myth of Tekla, or the singing graphs of Yll? Strange, it's almost as though you're attempting to smuggle in your religion and no other."

"Madam, you are being facetious. Societies are built around transcendent narratives. They cannot endure without them, such is your society demonstrating. That is that."

Marta tried to smile kindly, though could not quarantine her anger from it. "Yet we Gearheartians *do* have a transcendent narrative, sir. The night sky. The hundred billion galaxies and hundred trillion stars within them. I'm sorry if those stars and galaxies don't personally care about you, that's unfortunate. But do we have to cheapen the majesty of nature by trying to see divine purpose in it? The universe has so far proven to be apathetic about our respective existences. That isn't warming news, but it is *the* news, and as adults we're supposed to be honest with ourselves regarding such a thing.

"Biological evolution wasn't a pleasant prospect for the ancients to come around to. Many did everything they could to deny the evidence at first, but there it was—we came from dirt. In time, we incorporated those new and difficult findings into our worldviews, tempered our egos. Later we were better for it, much like a child eventually accepting the hard edges of the world so as not to injure herself so badly on the next occasion."

Mriga said, "Very noble, madam. Spoken like a true champion of reason. The only problem, of course, is that no one would choose to live under such a dark, abyssal narrative as yours. You have no answers, only vapid questions. What is the point of life? How best to live? Where do we go when we die? You only inject doubt where Bodhi has certainty. Tell me,

where do you think the night sky came from, Dr Tereshkova? You have no explanation for why there's anything here at all."

Marta groaned, "And *neither do you in the slightest*, the only difference being that Gearheart is honest enough to admit that. I'm sorry if ignorance scares you. I'm sorry if you can't stand the thought of dying before you've found the meta-yes. But that's how this works, for now. And in the meantime, bookended by birth and death, riding about in bodies of carbon, loving, suffering, striving, for a short, *short* time, we get to *be*. If we're forced to *be* in a mysterious universe, and that universe is mute on the subject of its own motivations for existing, I'll still take living in honest ignorance over your metaphysical posturing any day. That's *real* bravery. Not concocting blatantly contradictory stories to comfort oneself, not appealing to the vague transcendent every time you get your worldview in a twist. *Ignorance.* Brave, honest admission of one's ignorance, and living with that ignorance in a kind, compassionate manner, treating each other well even if we know we eventually all go to dust and never happen again. We must try to be wise, to be good women, to be good men. The rite of adulthood is the admission of ignorance, not the proliferation of fabricated stories to assuage our existential fears.

"Lord Mriga, we may be living in the last days of galactic civilisation. You can posture all you like and call the bivnik models wrong, or claim Anaximander will save us, or whatever suits you, but we won't stand for it. The mark of a society's stupidity is the degree to which it believes its own myths. But I'll tell you what's better than myths, better than narratives, better than turning ourselves into animals and walking through fourspace just to stave off the knowledge that we'll still all go to ashes one day. Metaphysical maturity. The recognition that this is *our* galaxy, these are *our* stars, these are *our* citizens, and *our* children. The price of having these things is taking responsibility for them. If we keep peddling propaganda about our divine right to exploit resources in the name of some Great Above despite the obvious drawbacks of such behaviour, then all the suns will burn out long before we achieve even a scrap of the meta-yes. Power is fine. Restraint is better. Technology saves some. Compassion saves all."

Mriga made a *tut tut tut* noise with his tongue. Leisurely he said, "Well now, what a fine speech if any of it were true. Let's evaluate your principles in practice, Dr Tereshkova. The public statistics put twenty percent of Gearheart's global population below the galactic poverty line. Water

pollution is rampant. You are currently engaged in three simultaneous pandemics. Your suicide rate is five times that of the entirety of all the Bodhi Empire worlds combined. How is the night sky working as a narrative? How well are those uncaring stars taking care of your society, Dr Tereshkova? Our citizens are vexologically altered by Empress Jetsunma and may live forever if they choose. Your citizens live mere centuries at best. Our temples and libraries are free to enter and use, whereas your knowledge centres are prohibitively expensive for the general population. We champion the right of all common natives and Devas to attain Nibbana, and offer spiritual training to all who seek it. Your population starve in the gutter for the sake of building one more starship. Tell us again how pure the scientific method is. Tell us again how we'll all hold hands and brave the black that way. Admit it, madam. You love to preach, but your society speaks for itself."

Marta shifted awkwardly. "I admit there are *some* issues at present, but our scholars are hard at work on resolving them. I have only been back on Gearheart for several weeks. It has hardly been enough time to—"

A chant began about Mriga, many hundreds of voices compounding upon one another in an echoing chorus. Mriga levitated slowly above his prayer cushion, his fur glimmering, his hooves raised towards the optical crystal in a manner that suggested that they could, and would, embrace all. He said, "Gearheart offers the void. We offer the eternal."

In the Great Hall, several Gearheart scholars about Marta fell to their bellies and prostrated before the projector screen, before the image of the levitating deer.

Ten billion miles distant, Leo whispered, "Oh gods. . ."

9.

With the Gearheart fleet at near maximum speed, there was little for the crew to do but occasionally readjust their heading.

Theodora and Lepus spent much of their time in bed.

Madeleine tended to navigation and mechanical maintenance.

Leo passed a long while in the great, transparent dome of the observatory of *The Johannes* watching fourspace through the bivniscope. The fleet was so distant from the major populated worlds now that the stars appeared a healthy purple, still brimming with stoyanium, unplundered.

Sola was too distant to make out, but Leo knew the direction in which to look.

Somewhere beyond the porthole, in a patch of vacuum and black, was Bodhi, was Hisarya, was Mriga—preparing, no doubt, for the final Sangha debate, and whatever foul thing they should intend after that.

10.

The galaxy fell silent one final time. The moderator said, “Dean Tereshkova, Lord Mriga, as it stands, over fifty thousand ex-Union worlds have now opted for induction into the Bodhi Empire, and twelve thousand have requested membership of the Gearheart Confederation. Clearly the galaxy is polarised. For this, our last debate together, we shan’t dive quite so deeply into the abstract. Rather, this might be a good opportunity to lay out why any undecided worlds should choose Bodhi over Gearheart, or vice versa. Lord Mriga, would you like to take your turn first?

“Certainly.” Mriga bowed thankfully, wrapped as he was now in a gold-embroidered cloak. “Aside from our spiritual superiority and infinite compassion, new citizens to our empire can expect a number of benefits. Not only do our oshos provide protection from attacking Gearheart fleets —”

Marta blurted, “No Gearheart boat has *ever* attacked a Bodhi—”

Mriga said politely, “I’m sorry, Dean Tereshkova, but I believe I was talking. We will provide substantial protection against any Gearheart attacks, and spiritual nourishment to all who request it. Furthermore, we are currently engaged in a number of religio-technological projects and will share these discoveries with all who wish it.”

The moderator said, “Lord Mriga, there is a rumour that Bodhi has developed jhanamoksha. Is this the case?”

Mriga smiled playfully. “On that I couldn’t possibly comment. Though, if the rumour were true, we would certainly be willing to distribute the technology for free, unlike our backwards Gearheart friends. With it, worlds could be transited in mere hours. Perfect wisdom would bloom. A deep peace would descend forevermore over the galaxy. That is my promise to the citizens of the Bodhi Empire. That is my promise to all native and Devan kind.” He bowed once again to the optical lens.

The moderator said, “Dean Tereshkova, you have two minutes. If you please.”

Marta put out her cigarette and straightened her pyjamas. “Lord Mriga made several accusations during our last debate, and I do not deny them. The Gearheart Confederation has problems. Our citizens do not live as long, nor attain some supposed state of internal peace through meditation and narcotics. We cannot hope to stand up to Bodhi’s spiritual prowess.”

Lepus murmured from his deckchair on *The Johannes*, “The hell is she doing?”

“Just wait. . .” Leo said.

“But maybe we should ask what the *cost* of that prowess is,” Marta continued. “No technology comes for free. No wisdom is delivered without toil. And we do indeed now know the price of Bodhi’s wisdom. Human lives. Lord Mriga’s original tactic of turning native children into glorified moksha batteries has only been accelerated as—”

Mriga shouted, “That is unfounded—”

Marta said politely, “I’m sorry, Venerable Lord Mriga, but I believe I was talking.” She made a deep, mocking bow. “Gearheart has accepted a number of refugees over the years, many of them fleeing Bodhi’s clutches and telling of family members young and old alike who were ‘inducted’ into La Geometrica Familia and never seen again. Further investigation only confirmed what was already feared. Natives are being reaped for their moksha. *That* is the price of Lord Mriga’s promises. Levitate, walk through walls, glimpse the transcendent object at the end of time, all in exchange for the death of one’s kin, their skin squeezed dry, their bones ground up.”

Mriga roared, “Slander! Heinous, unfounded—”

“My two minutes are not up, sir. In the meantime, please focus on your breath and meditate on compassion. You seem anxious.” She straightened her back as the strategists had advised, lit another cigarette as they had

advised against. She said warmly, as though to a friend, “As I have said, Gearheart cannot promise unending life or feats of magic. What it delivers instead is a life free of slaughter and ritualistic cannibalism. Moreover, under my administration, we will not only stop the deadly bivnik effect Lord Mriga so vehemently denies, but provide technological marvels to our population such has never been seen in the galaxy before.”

She activated her vexoskeleton. She rose from the ground and levitated silently over the Gearheart audience. Air appeared to warp in three and fourspace behind, the room darkening about her as though matter itself had become reverent.

She said directly into the optical crystal, “Gearheart has achieved much the same mastery of Vex as Bodhi, only we do not do it through murder. We use rationality, technology, and science. We have reclaimed magic via number and reason, and are willing to share the fruits with all those who request them. No one need bow. No one need supplicate. No one need submit to those who talk of modesty while living in palaces, who talk of restraint while dispatching crusades, who talk of morality while founding an entire empire built on the consumption of the flesh of helpless natives.” She floated yet further into the air, the shining metal plates of the great bivnik s*chema* behind her. She said in mechanically-assisted vexspeech, “The era of false gods is over. Nothing is sacred and everything is possible.”

11.

Several days after the debate, Leo looked up from his cabin desk to find a stack of parchment was hovering slightly.

He stood and noticed he was lighter than he should be.

He bolted down the stairwell, through the library, barely able to keep his feet on the ground, the artificial gravity of *The Johannes* weakening still. By the time he reached the Great Corridor, he was weightless.

At least five hundred crew members were swimming about in zero gravity and drinking heavily. At Leo’s entrance, they paused in baited apprehension.

Lepus and Theodora vaulted over.

“What the *hell* is going on?” Leo said.

Lepus nodded to Madeleine above. She had collapsed into a dust-image of what appeared to be a broadcast from inside Scholar’s Tower, on Gearheart.

Theodora said, “They’re signing the official alliance treaty, haven’t you heard?”

“What?”

“One hundred thousand new worlds are joining the Gearheart Confederation after the last debate. That’s even more converts than Bodhi’s managed. Thought we’d turn the gravity off and make a shindig of it.”

Leo floated in silence a moment, mouth open. “She did it?”

Lepus said, “She did it.”

Leo attempted a zero gravity backflip and crashed into a porthole.

Theodora rescued him from his tumble and raised his fist triumphantly. The crew began to cheer and resumed their drinking with full abandon, champagne popped, the froth expanding weightless in all directions, the corks pinging about the Great Corridor like exultant bullets.

12.

Yanko entered Marta’s private chamber without knocking to find her putting on official dean robes. He bowed, said, “Pardon the interruption.”

“What is it?”

“The Devan ambassadors are still being checked by security. You’re expected at the ceremony in twenty minutes.”

“I’m aware, thank you.”

“Are you prepared?”

“As much as I can be.” She shuffled parchment, said, “Is that everything?”

He produced a bottle of something blue. “With you having done so well to bring in Gearheart convert worlds, I thought we might toast to the final success.”

“I’d like to keep a clear head for signing the new members. I’ll see you downstairs.”

Yanko didn’t leave, but crossed to the window and watched the Gearheart afternoon. He said in a wistful voice, “It’s so strange to think that you are older than me, yet I’ve lived more years.”

“Time dilation is what it is,” Marta said.

“I don’t just mean my wrinkles. You’re still young in all the ways that count, your mind, your ambition.”

What game is this? Marta wondered. *Why is every interaction a damn arms race these days?* Trying to hide her irritation, she said, “Can we do the heart-to-heart after the debate?”

“I’m sure your father would be terribly proud of you, leading the world like this. Do you think he’s watching?”

She looked over his shoulder to the sky. “I hope so.”

Down in the street, a parade was filing past: cymbals, bagpipes, Marta’s face on a huge banner.

Yanko said, “I just wanted to thank you for letting me stay on as a diplomat. I know we have different approaches to how a government should be run, and we’ll never see eye to eye, but you should know that you were right. You were right all along. We've fallen into a cycle of self-absorption. Your return here was our one saving grace of the last half-century.”

My god, she thought. *Perhaps this isn’t a game.*

Softening, she said, “I’m really very happy to hear that.” Then, softer yet, feeling herself “off-duty” for the first time in a long while: “I never wanted to do this. Gods, I don’t know how you managed to stay sane in high government for so long. . .”

Yanko raised the blue bottle. “The secret of my endurance. Alcohol does not judge.”

A great weight lifted. She said, “Yanko, I hope you don’t hold my succession to the deanhood against me.”

“Not for a second.”

Hell, we’ve won, Marta thought. *We’ve won, and no lives have been lost for it. Thousands of worlds will switch to vexboats soon. Bivnik will be slowed in months, then neutralised.* She eyed the parchment and inkwell on her desk. *When the treaty is signed and this day is over, in the evening,*

alone, I will write to Papa. I will tell him I understand, that I forgive him. I will tell him I love him.

Yanko offered his arm and Marta put hers through it. They descended the central staircase together.

At the bottom of the staircase were the many dignitaries of the Gearheart domains in their finest attire, waiting to meet with the Devan ambassadors. “Many thanks for attending,” Yanko said. Then, stepping behind Marta, “Excuse me, I should learn to defer to Dean Tereshkova,” and gave an encouraging smile.

Marta said, “Dignitaries, we are honoured you could make the occasion.”

Yanko called for glasses and poured his blue alcohol for all present. “Before our Devan friends are admitted to the tower and our confederation is expanded, let us toast to this great success.”

“Hear, hear,” Marta said.

“Hear, hear,” the dignitaries echoed.

13.

The crew of the Gearheart fleet jumped through their vexlocks, ripped through fourspace, and appeared within *The Johannes.* They came with wine and beer and narcotics, dressed in attire they had been saving especially for arrival at Annica, though deemed this a day worthy of the same level of esteem.

They burst into the Great Corridor, hundreds of folk already tumbling about drunk in the air, revelling in the ecstasy of Marta’s success. They sought out Leo to shake his hand, to kiss him on his cheeks, to commend him on his daughter and her brilliance.

Musicians came next with kavals and gaidas, in traditional Bulgar dress, to honour those who had set out for the stars before even the Myriad of Man. They sang in the old tongue, in that first universal language, the rhythm asymmetrical, the tempo frenetic.

Stupil dobre, stupil dobre, na byal mermer kamuk. . .Good step, good step, on white marble stone. . .

On the bridge of *The Johannes,* the helmswoman—so drunk she could barely stand—wrenched the thrust lever to maximum. The fleet tore through Vex, the fractal blooms and spirals beyond the portholes whipping about psychedelic, victorious mandalas, as though the galaxy itself was cheering them onto Annica, to destiny, to whatever powerful and esoteric technologies Anaximander had left for the claiming.

To measure, to measure a grey dove. . .

The crew peered up again and again to Madeleine's dust-image above, to the arrival of the Devan ambassadors at Scholar's Tower. They watched the ambassadors enter through the vaulted door as natives, as humans, already gone through moksha withdrawal in honour of joining the Gearheart Confederation. They walked, stumbling, children only just learned to walk, still unused to these new, old native bodies. They approached Marta and the Gearheartian dignitaries, and, not standing on ceremony, hugged each Gearheartian in turn.

The fleet crew whooped and cheered under the dust-image, stars streaking past the portholes faster now, as the singers sang, as the crew bounced from wall to wall, everything drink and music and *yes*, and *yes*, and *yes.*

Do not die, grey dove, do not let your poor heart die, grey dove. . .

Leo watched Lepus and Theodora attempting summersaults by the central porthole. He thought, *What is it to give up all that Devan power? Surely better to be born blind than lose one's sight later on.*

Theodora paused to look beyond the porthole and Lepus followed her gaze. He said, "You can't see the Meta-cluster on this side of the boat, you know."

"I wasn't looking for the Meta-cluster, old man."

"What then?"

Her face was flushed red with wine. Her eyes were wide with the knowledge that the great trials were over. She said, “All those years on Phoebe and the only thing I dreamt of was throwing off my stupid priestess robes and just flying out into the black by myself.” She pointed vaguely to space. “Any direction, just out. Away from politics. Away from religion. I wanted to be properly naked.”

“I can help you with that last part.”

She jumped off the wall and did a spin. “And here we are out in the black. Barred from Vex, but we’re out, finally.”

“That’s right.”

She caught his leg and pulled him into her orbit. She said, “When we get back to Gearheart, I want to make a go of it. I want to live on a farm outside the city, keep bivniks and horses. You and I should never have taken up stupid positions of authority.”

“Agreed and agreed.”

She kissed him on the mouth. “Let’s live together properly when we’re home on Gearheart again. Ursula can write the chronicles of Gearheart, and I’ll dance, and you can drink all the time. We’ll get old in the native way. And I’ll love you, and I’ll love you, and I’ll love you. . .”

“Yes,” Lepus said. He kissed her back on the mouth. “Yes.”

Do not die, grey dove, do not let your poor heart die, grey dove. . .

14.

It started pleasantly, a sense in Marta’s mind that the mental chatter was dimming. At first she thought it an effect of the alcohol, or perhaps the giddiness of the day itself.

The treaty was unfurled before them all by two low-scholars; a long reel of parchment, and many quills and pots of ink.

“An archaic tradition, but one we believe has weight,” Marta said apologetically.

The Devan ambassadors smiled peaceably and took up their quills.

They began to sign the declarations, forfeiting their sovereignty in return for Gearheart's protection, for Gearheart's technology.

Marta turned to catch Yanko's eye and noticed that his glass of Bodhi liquor was still full. He followed her gaze, smiled flatly to her.

She grabbed the bottle from him, smelled the contents; the faint hint of pepper.

Her eyes widened, even as her mind contracted. Her senses remained in totality, though she could no longer piece them together in any meaningful way, as though consciousness was dimming to a grey, flat puddle.

"Contramoksha," she whispered. Yanko cocked his head in a mockery of innocence. "We've all been drinking contramoksha," she yelled.

The Gearheart dignitaries stared back with the beginnings of panic. Soon enough their faces softened and became incurious.

The Devan ambassadors fled for the main door, then paused with sudden indifference.

Marta tried to spool up her vexoskeleton, but could no longer find the mental wherewithal to operate it. She tried to flee back up the central staircase, but could no longer remember what she was running from.

She only smiled fecklessly. "Contra. . ." she said, the horror draining from her voice as she lost interest in the word.

"—moksha," Yanko finished.

15.

The Great Corridor of *The Johannes* fell suddenly to silence.

The crew watched Marta and the dignitaries and the ambassadors frozen in flummoxed silence.

They watched Yanko Patzel warp into a slithering mass of tentacles, extruding himself across the doors, across the windows, barring exit. His head loomed tall over his expanding bulk, and his face took on the appearance of Osho Pechev.

His tentacles wrapped about the dignitaries and ambassadors, around all he could grab.

Amid the screams of *The Johannes'* crew, Madeleine shut the dust-image off.

16.

Official pictures arrived from Gearheart several days later of Pechev's body, stabbed and subdued by the matterspears of the security phalanxes of Scholar's Tower.

Next came quiet scenes of empty streets, of flags at half-mast.

Later, the funerals: first Devan, then native.

Finally, there lay pale Marta, dressed in her undergraduate robes, reduced to her first academic rank in accordance with tradition.

The next images were of her body being carried through the streets by a silent crowd.

Then her casket in a grave, spyles wrapped about the casket like a blanket.

Then the undertakers hauling dirt into the grave, the spyles still clinging to the casket, refusing to give Marta up to the ground.

Then the spyles giving up at last.

Then only a filled grave.

X

It is without question that we live inside a dream.

I do not mean this world is illusory or submissive to one's will. Rather, you will have noticed that when inside a dream, despite the contorted narrative, and the sudden return of friends long dead, and a crack in the sky—for as long as you are asleep, the logic holds. It is only upon waking that you realise there was no logic to the dream at all.

The waking world is no different.

Yes, we are familiar with the presentations of light and sound and time. Yes, we are aware that two objects cannot occupy the same space, that eleven is a prime number, and so on. But what is the logic *beneath* these presentations? What is so self-evident about light or sound or time?

The answer is: nothing.

The world is not comprehensible. It is only that we have been asleep so long its incomprehensibility has become familiar.

- Excerpts from **The Metaphysical Sutras of Lord Anaximander**

1.

A congregation of ten thousand oshos gathered on the lip of Sinner’s Drop of La Geometrica Familia.

In their red robes, they appeared one great line of reverent fire, asanawa cords about their torsos: fish, gibbons, lions, geese.

A trumpet rang out. Empress Jetsunma, Lord Mriga, and Prince Itzo materialised before the oshos. The oshos bowed low, then lower, attempting to outdo one another in submission.

Mriga was wearing newmetal chainmail, and a decorative dagger hung from his haunch.

Hisarya was in battledress also, her yellow ocelot paws in gauntlets, her fur encased in newmetal armour.

Itzo only wore his usual toga, staring into space, the beginning of a quizzical smile on his lips.

Mriga called, “Thus have I heard, it was two thousand years ago the Golden One ascended finally into that cosmic attic, Nibbana. For millennia we have endeavoured to follow him, to know what sublime fruits he ate there, to hear the music of True Satisfaction. I can confirm that Prince Itzo has broken through into that holy realm, and that he will lead us there presently. You will see many exotic things in Nibbana, for it is no more comparable to Vex than Vex is comparable to Samsara. But you will find your feet. Be a firm tree in the storm of your fear. Watch your confusion, watch your terror, wish it well, wish it goodbye.”

The oshos made the golden spiral on their foreheads.

Mriga said, “We feel the absence of Osho Pechev today. He is one more irreplaceable jewel taken from us by Gearheart. But his passing has not been in vain. Long has it been rumoured that at the edge of the galaxy, within a pestilent fortress, waits a false god who claims the title of Maitreya. Before Osho Pechev’s passing, he was able to deliver us the coordinates of this rumoured false god. It is there we are headed now, in Nibbana. If the pseudo-Maitreya is located, we shall afford him no mercy.”

“No mercy!” the oshos echoed.

“Make no mistake, the Wayward Brother Leo Tereshkov and his army shall dwell there shortly in ambush, in vehicles of metal. Those folk are sub-spiritual and will make great violence.” Lowly he said, “Bind each of them until they burst. Remove their heads, remove their feet. Show them the sharp end of True Insight.”

He bent to Hisarya’s leg and broke the newmetal shackle. He whispered, “I will keep watch on you at all times.”

“My lord,” she murmured.

“Now, Empress. As we discussed.”

Hisarya took Itzo’s hand. She said, ***Moment of maximal importance.*** *Take me to the land where the dreams cease, my darling.*

Itzo looked up at his mother uncertainly a moment. She tried to feign a smile.

He walked light then, weightless, as though believing it were just he and Hisarya leaving for a picnic. Hisarya followed his steps, keeping his hand tight in her paw. So did she extend her other paw behind, and Mriga took it with his mouth. An osho took Mriga’s tail, and another osho took that osho’s hand, until they were one great undulating rope walking into Nibbana, yelling battle cries, cheering with bloodlust—screaming cormorants plunging into a lake of psychic fire.

2.

The world warped manically for the congregation, twisting, collapsing, twisting, reforming. Many struggled to control their Nibbana-limbs, whirling about in dana and sila, reaching for one another, but unable to understand the new geometry.

A few oshos took to Nibbana quickly and joined Hisarya’s side. Many only flailed about helpless.

Mriga joined Hisarya also after a time. He presented as a mad, fractal explosion as most things were in this place—his antlers the height of a sun.

He took a few moments trying to understand speech in Nibbana, trying to recognise his words as the colours they translated to. He called out to

Hisarya, *We continue.*

She called back, *We should wait for the others.*

Mriga replied, *Many shan't find their legs, but they'll survive, so long as madness doesn't kill them. We continue with the oshos we have. Lead, Empress. Lead, Prince Hristo.*

Hisarya pointed to Annica, to the edge of the galaxy, and Itzo led them on.

3.

Hisarya flew quickly dana, squinting behind with her Nibbana-eyes for the congregation. She could spy Mriga and the others just faintly in the distance.

She said to Itzo, ***Imminent matter.*** *Beloved, we're going to swim away from the others now. I want you to stay calm.*

Itzo said, ***Seeds of panic.*** *Where to?*

Hisarya said, *Away, to safe, to good. Do you trust me?*

Itzo said, ***Love. And love. And love.***

Hisarya gripped his hand tighter in her paw, most of her highmind still devoted to just trying to stay sane.

She swam suddenly at a right angle to the congregation, kicking her legs desperately, absconding, pulling the two of them into empty space.

Mriga called to them, tendrils of questioning crimson.

Hisarya did not reply, but turned ahead again to the black, in no direction but away.

4.

Soon they were so distant that the congregation had almost vanished behind.

Now where? Hisarya thought.

She eyed the stars, eyed the nebulae.

The bliss moons, perhaps. We'll disguise ourselves. Or an unclaimed world. Maybe Itzo could reform it with his power, bring oxygen, even life.

She said, ***Inquiry with no presumptions.*** *We shall take a little holiday, beloved. Where do you wish to go?*

Itzo pointed with his morphing finger ahead, to a flurry of whirling light; fast approaching plumes of ribboned geometry curling about in a sublime halo.

Hisarya attempted to avoid the light, but it seemed to reach for her.

The light shone blue, twisted dana. She recognised this sequence as: *Hello Empress of All.*

You again, Hisarya said.

The very same, the entity said. *Stop a moment, let's talk further.*

Hisarya said. *Now is not the time, we are fleeing.*

The entity said, *How strange. You appear in a rush to arrive at an undefined destination.*

Itzo said, ***Rhetorical retort.*** *Better to hurry into the unknown than dawdle in certainty.*

The entity said, *Well now, how true.*

Hisarya said, *Who are you*?

What came into her mind then was vague images, a sense of depth, the enormity of measureless caverns.

Within those caverns were beings, or minds of a sort—artefacts more than mere matter at least. She felt intention on their behalf, strange, incomprehensible desires and fears, plans and aversions.

Are these other creatures, other civilisations? Hisarya said. *Show me more.*

The entity extended a sparkling ribbon. The ribbon fluttered back and forth, vex and weg, dana and sila—it was a sage's tongue or a page of scripture. The entity said, *You're all power without wisdom, Empress of All. Let me humble you a little.*

How dare you speak to me in such a manner, Hisarya snapped.

How dare I indeed, the entity said, still offering its ribbon of light. *A small history lesson. We'll be back in no time at all.*

Hisarya peered behind. Mriga and his oshos were beginning to close the distance in their chase. *Now is not the moment,* she said.

The entity said, *I will not offer this thing again.*

The cavern of time called once more in her mind, the many thousands of strange beverages and foodstuffs; titanic structures in orbit of gas giants; great economies, great passion, great graves.

Who are you? she repeated.

Today, your friend, the entity said.

Itzo and Hisarya reached for the ribbon of light.

5.

They were off suddenly, bounding through space, pulled from the oshos so quickly that the oshos disappeared to nothing; sprinting sila, light-years in seconds, shrinking, expanding, retracting from the galaxy until the three of them were above it—such was the drunken geometry.

They raced sila yet faster until another galaxy came into view.

Then another and another.

Ten billion suns burned before them.

In Samsara, Hisarya knew this as the galactic cluster Lanniakea—the one hundred thousand neighbouring galaxies of the Milky Way, and the one hundred thousand stars within each of those galaxies.

They receded even beyond that, a new cluster Hisarya knew no holy nor scientific name for.

The entity gestured to little points of light, to galaxies, and named them. Some were expressed as chords, and some as numbers or dances. Other times the entity communicated by puffing itself out in five dimensions, or disappeared entirely a while, replaced with choral echoes.

The entity pointed dana to a purple spot of light. *That is where I was raised.* Next it gestured to a green spot of light. *That is where you were raised.*

Hisarya said, *We come from different galaxies? That's impossible. No one can cross the distance.*

The entity replied, *The distance is too far for you, perhaps. . .*

Hisarya whispered or shouted or span, *There is no escaping galaxies, the distances are too vast, even travelling via Nibbana. You mean to say there are realms above Nibbana?*

Oh, millions, came the reply.

Then teach me. Please, teach me how to reach them.

What do you believe that would achieve? the entity said.

I will take my son so far across space that no one will ever find him. He will be free, Hisarya said, surprised at the starkness of her own honesty. She made herself small and deferential in Nibbana. *If you teach me to use this realm, or the realms above, I swear I will use that power for good. I will protect my son. It is all I wish to do now.*

6.

They dove back into the stars and swam through space with ease.

Planets passed at reckless speed. Many were barren wastelands.

No, Hisarya realised. All of them were barren wastelands. Hisarya said, *Is this real or a hallucination?*

The entity said, *A question one should ask daily.*

On, to graveyards of impossibly huge starships of eldritch design, to derelict star platforms, to the fossils of great, million-year-dead beasts of unfamiliar species, to spirals of frozen, blue blood in the dying light of dying suns, to—

No, Hisarya said. *Stop, that's enough.*

The entity did not stop, but only pulled them further, faster, sila, dana, a million times the speed of light in Samsara until they came upon a constellation in the shape of a shell of some kind. The constellation was perfect, clearly artificially constructed.

The entity said, *This is the first cosmic empire, risen seven billion years ago. There is nothing they do not understand. They have subjugated every known force. They have invented new forces. They have finished ethics. They have solved the riddle of Is. And, Empress of All, if you will prostrate*

yourself before just one of the creatures of this empire, I will teach you the secrets of Nibbana. I will teach you the secrets of the realms above, and your son shall be forever safe.

Hisarya's eyes grew wide. She said, *Do you promise this?*

Certainly. You will become the most powerful, most enlightened mind of your race. You may disappear star systems in an instant, vanish galaxies on a whim. If you will submit to these creatures just once, forever after, all will submit to you.

She let go of the ribbon of light and kicked dana and sila, racing about in search of the populated planets of the great empire, looking for a citizen or official—Itzo and the entity trailing dutifully behind.

They passed shimmering spheres wrapped tight around stars. They passed glittering mechanisms orbiting black holes. They passed monuments made of dark matter, and impossible geometrical objects made of light matter.

They arrived on a planet sitting at the direct centre of the shell constellation. From orbit it appeared a mechanical pangolin, covered as it was from pole to pole in scales of metal and crystal. They alighted onto the surface.

Castles and mansions stretched from horizon to horizon. Palaces abounded as common as moksha on Bodhi.

They skirted the equator. All about the air floated what appeared to be star maps depicting the majesty of this empire and the many worlds it contained. All about the ground were inscribed equations detailing the majesty of how much this empire had altered in nature.

Hisarya raced across the land faster, peering through windows, into caverns.

Not a single creature was to be found.

They came to the north pole where there stood a towering statue of some exotic, bulbous creature cast in iridescent, warping matter.

The creature was extending an appendage, and within the appendage sat a hundred thousand stars, all under the sigil of the shell.

Below the creature, much of the base of the statue was missing, and many of the creature's limbs had fallen to the ground over the millennia; some smashed to dust, others only cracked and riven with deep time.

Amid the dust and ruin, scrawled as though with a blunt knife by a nervous hand, was an inscription.

The entity spoke the translation aloud.

And so we cried we were inevitable, before being killed forever.

7.

Hisarya whispered, *You tricked me, there's no one left. . .*

The entity said, *Empress of All, you tricked yourself. Life never arises in the same way twice. Sometimes it walks on legs, other times it slithers. Sometimes it thinks with brains, other times not at all. But in each case there is one trait forever the same.*

Violence, Hisarya said.

No.

Cleverness.

No.

She called out in ruby light, sang part in anger, part in awe, *Then what?*

Before them trotted a bumbling creature, thick-furred, snouted. A bivnik beast of Gearheart.

From its snout grew a tusk, and the tusk curved up and back around to the head.

Though fat, the bivnik wandered far, looking for grubs and truffles, snorting and grunting.

It crossed tundra and desert, the sun and stars rolling over and over above it, and as it walked its tusk extended still. Seeing its tusk growing towards its own forehead, the bivnik trotted faster and faster, as though desperation of movement might save it somehow.

The stars span on, accelerating.

At last, the bivnik spied insects on a branch. Its trotters minced so quickly in anticipation they almost blurred invisible.

And just as it was to open its mouth and welcome those insects into its belly, its tusk pierced its own fur, pierced its own flesh, then the skull, then the brain.

The beast fell dead. The sun and stars paused a moment to watch, then continued apathetic.

Moderation or self-death, the entity said.

8.

Once again the entity extended its ribbon.

They passed more dead planets in the dead galaxy. Ice world, lava world, ice world, lava world.

Hisarya said, *If you teach me how to transcend Nibbana, I will stop this from ever happening again. In my galaxy, and the others.*

The entity said, *With what little power you have, you've already guaranteed self-extinction.*

Not yet, Hisarya said.

The process is over, runaway. It is too late to stop the expansion of your folk. They will colonise and multiply. They will eat everything.

I am not responsible. I did not do this, Hisarya said.

But you did, the entity said. *You made your choice and that choice was power.* It embraced her in blue light. It sang softly, *To reach Vex, one must master stars. That is a kind of intelligence test. To reach Nibbana, one must become cleverer still. There are realms yet above Nibbana, blissful, potent places containing creatures and phenomena I cannot tell you of. But just as it took rockets to reach the black, the realms above space require even more extraordinary technologies.*

Hisarya murmured, *What technologies?*

Wisdom, the entity said in sad cyan. *Self-control. Maturity. The survival of what you call bivnik. The true game of empire is not the subjugation of worlds so they might be collected in a little museum of power, but the cultivation of the wisdom to delay gratification.* Deeper, bluer then: *Only those species compassionate and peaceful enough may enter the higher realms. Those who are not. . .* It gestured to the dead galaxy. *These ruins belong to a species who chose power over moderation. Soon you will have your own ruins.*

Hisarya tried not to shout, and simultaneously tried not to cry. She said, *Do not threaten or jeer at me, nor tell me what to do. I have taken thousands of worlds.*

And soon you'll be responsible for the death of thousands of worlds, the entity said in pale green triangles.

Spent, Hisarya whispered, *Please, just let me protect my son.*

The entity said, *He is estranged from Samsara by his biology. You allowed this.*

Yes. . . yes. . .

The entity continued, *But he may stay here, in the higher realms. It is the only chance for his continuation.*

Hisarya attempted to execute a grateful pirouette in fivespace. *You are kind, whatever your name. You are so kind. We shan't hassle you, we'll be model guests.*

The entity said, *He may stay, but the offer does not extend to you.*

Hisarya stared to Itzo helplessly. *No.*

Yes, the entity said. *I am sorry, but your place is in lower things. That is not a punishment, but a fact.*

Hisarya begged, *Then I'll take him far away, in Samsara, in threespace, where my empire will never find us.*

The entity sang, *And he will be forever an alien, to you, to everyone.*

9.

Hisarya and the entity argued for what felt days. The entity did not shout or impose, but only explained the state of things factually.

Finally Hisarya looked to the infinite tapestry of stars and wept.

She said to her son, ***Sincerity. More sincerity than I can express.*** *Do you understand what must happen now?*

Itzo said, *I do.*

You must be good.

I will, Mama.

And you must be kind.

I will, Mama.

She stroked his hair, in Samsara, in Vex, in Nibbana. She said, ***I cover my grief. I am strong for you.*** *Perhaps you will miss me. . . But what wonderful things you will see. . .*

Itzo said, *You will be in them always.*

She waited for something clever or wise to fall into her highmind, something that would signal a conclusion, knowing that her son would remember this moment for perhaps thousands of years yet.

Nothing.

She said to the entity, *You came to me for this, didn't you? To take him.*

The entity span a modest green. *Yes. He is an irregularity. Things of your standing should never have reached Nibbana. If everything goes well, they never will again.*

Trying not to cry, trying not to lose herself to her lowmind, Hisarya said, *What do I do now, without my son?*

The entity said, *Be strong for knowing your species has climbed as high as it is able. Make your peace before the fire comes.*

She wept, *How many live among you, in the higher realms, all peaceful and wise?*

The entity extended its tendrils to the splendour of the stars, to the hundred million galaxies. *They are everywhere and everywhen. They are singing always.*

Hisarya said, *I do not hear their song.*

No, the entity said, drawing Itzo away, destined for the deep night. *But your son will.*

10.

It was around midnight, boat-time, when the Gearheart fleet reached Annica.

On the bridge of *The Johannes,* the crew brought the boat to a stop and sat watching the vexed stars looping about in Moebius bows.

Madeleine fetched Leo from his cabin. She fashioned part of herself into an arm, and guided his stumbling legs across the bridge.

The crew had not seen Leo in several months. He sported a wild beard now and wore a loose toga, stains all about it, a bottle of something brown in his hand.

The crew saluted. Leo attempted to return the salute and fell over.

Madeleine helped him back up and span, *Perhaps it's best if Lepus assumes command of the fleet for now.*

"Sit me down," Leo slurred.

Madeleine guided him into his chair at the centre of the bridge.

The helmsman said, "Shall I take us out of fourspace, sir?"

"All right."

The radioman conferred with the other boats and, as one, the fleet emerged into regular geometry.

A planet waited before them.

Leo grunted at the sciencewoman. She said hurriedly, "No sign of an ecosystem, sir."

The telescopeman said, "It's not rock, sir. Not metal either. Hard to say if it's artificial."

"Bring us closer then," Leo muttered.

The radioman said, "Sir, Dr Lepus advises we remain here and take readings from a distance."

"Closer I said, damn you."

They neared the orb. The surface seemed to shimmer slightly as though terribly warm.

Leo said, "This is *really* the source of the signals?"

The radioman said, "I'm not detecting any radio emissions from the object itself, but this is certainly where they originated."

Madeleine whirled, *Attention!*

The surface of the orb swarmed suddenly with many thousands of dancing points of light. The telescopeman yelled, "Devas. They're Devas, thousands at least."

"Split the fleet," Leo yelled. "Radio each boat. Cut us into quarters, maximum thrust."

The bridge tilted suddenly, the crew pulled back into their seats as Annica set from view, struts and girders crying out with excessive momentum, the engines singing shrill.

11.

Onto the bridge of *The Johannes* stepped an elephant, a wasp, and a deer Leo immediately recognised as Mriga. Mriga wore a halo of blue fire and a righteous grin. He bowed before Leo. “Dr Tereshkov.”

Madeleine span, *They’ve gone fivespace. The newmetal hull won’t protect us.*

“Arm yourselves,” Leo cried. The crew grabbed for their weapons.

Leo fumbled at his belt for his sword. Mriga walked casually through Vex and bit the sword in half.

“May we ask what brings you to Annica, brave souls of Gearheart?” Mriga said politely.

The radioman cried, “*The Irate Librarian* reports they’ve been boarded.”

The radio itself rang out with screams, then went silent. Swallowing his fear, Leo said, “I suppose we’re both here for the same thing.”

“And what would that be?” Mriga purred.

“Peace. If we’re going to negotiate, I want to do it with my sister.”

Mriga raised an eyebrow, began to laugh. “The cattle make demands! And what do you suppose you have that you might bargain with?”

The elephant grabbed the commswoman in its trunk and contracted until she split in half. Next it ate the command chair, then the fleeing weaponsman. The wasp began on the engineers with its stinger.

Leo fell to his knees, crawling through the chaos on all fours. Mriga lunged for him. Madeleine shot between them in a protective net of dust. Mriga lunged again. The chief engineer blocked him with a matterspear, which Mriga ate with no grace.

At the bridge door, Leo turned about to witness a scene of only blood and slaughter. Madeleine pushed him through the door and sealed the

bulkhead behind them. She span, *It's electrified. It should hold them for a time.*

"The others," Leo said.

It's too late for them. Run. Please.

Leo stumbled down the main staircase, descending his way in almost-disaster triple steps. Out the porthole he caught sight of a maintenance vexboat splitting in half, then imploding into silent fire.

Please Leo, go.

They fled through the strategy halls, where folk hung impaled on staffs, where ostriches and octopuses dashed through the air at any native they could find.

Then down into the engineering decks. Everything was steam and pistons, and not so distantly, screams.

Leo ran for a radio console.

"Lepus," he yelled. There was only static for several infinite seconds.

Then Lepus' voice weakly replied, "Where are you, your holiness?"

"They've taken the bridge."

"We're not doing much better. We need to make groundfall. Theodora and I will meet you on the surface."

Leo and Madeleine set off running again, this time for the shuttle bay. They turned a corridor and a panther blocked their path. Madeleine became a sheet of furious dust. The panther stepped weg straight through her and advanced in little jolts of fivespace, disappearing, appearing closer, opening its mouth to reveal jade teeth. It vaulted.

Madeleine shot herself at Leo, smashed him over an electrified bulkhead, and sealed it behind them.

They fell into the arboretum, an enormous transparent dome. The two of them gazed up at the strange theatre above.

Boats were split in half, humans leaking out, petrified. Fire ripped from engine compartments, then shot back in and exploded hulls—tens of eggs all cracked, and the yolk that spilled out was frozen and still—parchment, clothes, and limbs.

A fuel tank whirled past and struck *The Johannes*. A crash rang out from below. A large section of the boat appeared before them, sheared

straight off, bodies falling out into the vacuum. Clearly visible in the debris was the remains of the shuttle bay.

“What now?” Leo whispered.

Keep running please, Leo.

Madeleine pulled him on through the artificial forest, decompression sirens screaming out, the corridors flashing red with alarms, past a gallery of crucified scholars.

At last they reached the vexlock. Its green power light was still winking affirmative.

Madeleine scoured about in a utility cavern, returned empty. *The pressure suits are all gone,* she span.

“What of it?”

We have to get to The Irate Librarian, *to their shuttle bay. Hold your breath please. We’re going to jump.*

“What, out of the vexlock? I’ll die.”

I’ll do my best not to let that happen, Leo. The Johannes will decompress shortly, this is our last chance.

“You’re fine in a vacuum. Find Lepus and Theodora. I’ll stay here and try to hold the boat together.”

The Johannes rocked with internal explosions. Leo was thrown to the floor. Madeleine helped him up, dabbing his bloody head with her dust. She span fiercely, *If I have to force you through the vexlock, I will. You’ll die if you stay here.*

“There is absolutely no way in hell—”

She wrapped sheet-like about his body, dragging him towards the vexlock, ignoring his yelling and protestations.

Hold your breath, Leo.

“I order you, I hell-damned order you to—”

One.

“Madeleine.”

Two.

With all her force she threw him over the dimensional barrier, the world exploding into extra-geometry before them; cold, silent, and death.

12.

On the bridge of *The Irate Librarian*, Theodora watched the eleventh vexboat explode ahead. A field of debris shot outwards and Theodora yelled for evasion.

The helmsman pulled the boat into Vex just long enough for the debris to pass through, though they saw the wreckage was a two-thing catastrophe, part threespace, part four.

Its fourspace extrusions tore straight through the underhull of *The Irate Librarian*, and the boat began to spin uncontrollably.

Retreat? She wondered. *Is it better to live a worm than die a hero?*

The bridge crew stared in silence as two science boats collided, spraying debris and fire. Theodora recognised one as *That's Mr Sir to You*. That left only *The Irate Librarian*, the remains of *The Johannes*, and a few maintenance boats.

The bridge was all yelling now: coordinates, body counts, every man and woman for themselves.

Theodora ran to the commsman. "Which decks are boarded?"

He shouted into the phone a moment. "Fifty-six through eighty," he said.

"The braidbomb is on deck forty-three, no?"

The commsman nodded grimly.

She took control of the radio console. "Lepus?" she yelled.

"Here."

"Is it time?"

"It's time."

To the commsman quietly Theodora said, "For what it's worth, command of the bridge is yours."

"Madam," he said, his eyes terrified.

"Are your parents in the fleet?"

"No, back on Gearheart."

"Then send them a message by comms. Use all the bandwidth you like."

"Do I tell them goodbye?"

She kissed his hand, gave him her master keys. “Order Engineering to activate the braidbomb, twenty minutes silent countdown.”

A pipe fell from the ceiling, spraying ozone everywhere. A low-scholar yelled, covering his eyes, blood leaking through his fingers.

Theodora ran, taking the bridge staircase in double steps, racing through scenes of fire and screams, the boat collapsing from the inside.

13.

Lepus was climbing into battledress in the armoury of *The Irate Librarian* when a flurry of dust and limbs exploded through the hull. He raised his matterspear, only to find it was Madeleine and an unconscious Leo.

Madeleine span, *Vacuum shock. Is the boat’s doctor near?*

“No, dead,” Lepus said. “What were you doing outside?”

Please.

Lepus examined Leo and found a weak pulse, the surrounding soldiers watching in horror. He slapped Leo’s freezing cheeks: no response. He pulled open Leo’s eyes, yelled all manner of curses. Still nothing.

He set his matterspear to middling power and jabbed Leo in the chest.

Leo screamed, coming to suddenly in a spasm.

Leo, Madeleine span. *It’s all right, we’re on* The Irate Librarian.

“*The Johannes*, the crew?” Leo murmured.

It’s too late. We have to get to the surface now.

Lepus helped Leo to his feet and Leo stumbled about, yelling in pain. Lepus said, “Your holiness, we need to get you into armour.”

Leo only continued yelling. Lepus produced his hipflask, poured several shots of grape brandy down Leo’s throat, and he ceased yelling quite so loudly then.

Theodora came sprinting into the armoury, her face covered in blood. Lepus said, “Get the soldiers into their armour. You too, Teddy.”

Something smashed into the hull and *The Irate Librarian* began to whirl upwards, pulling the crew to the ground. Lepus roared, “Armour, now!”

The soldiers climbed into their newmetal suits, strapped on their vexoskeletons. Lepus dressed Leo hurriedly, pulled the chainmail over his head so violently Leo's face bled. "Arm yourself, your holiness."

Many of the armoury weapons Leo didn't recognise, clearly a product of Gearheart's recent technological developments: a silver baton that disappeared in and out of Vex, a polished orb of glass, swords that shone the glimmer of newmetal.

Leo, Lepus, and Theodora joined the waiting boarding party; twenty soldiers, some sporting hand cannons, others swords and robotic equivalents of various Bodhi weapons.

They boarded the shuttle, no one even bothering to strap in. The pilot undocked so aggressively that many fell to the floor in a muddle of swords and helmets.

There was a whir of a vexrig somewhere behind, and without ceremony the shuttle slipped into Vex, the stars blooming into loops and bows.

All gazed silently from portholes to the remains of the Gearheart fleet as they pulled away.

Viewed from Vex, the Devas were not distant robed animals any longer, but towering beasts, some half the length of *The Johannes* alone. They were flitting about the fleet leisurely, revelling in the play of the thing.

A Deva the shape of a jellyfish wrapped itself about one of the little maintenance boats, crunching the thing between its tentacles until there was only debris and sprawling bodies.

Leo squinted ahead to catch sight of more Devas heading for the shuttle —snakes the length of city streets, centaurs galloping up from Annica with manes of barbed wire and teeth of flames.

The pilot banked hard, threw them back through threespace a moment, then re-entered Vex.

Lions, sharks, and herons whirled past, turned about, and swam weg for the shuttle.

The pilot shouted, "Sirs, where do we land?"

Leo studied the radar through vacuum-broken eyes. The ground appeared featureless.

Lepus said, "Just fly low."

They cut through the atmosphere in seconds. The pilot pulled them back into threespace again and gave Madeleine full control of the helm. She flew them between sand dunes not ten feet from the ground, the radar panel still showing nothing of note.

Vicious animal silhouettes neared behind.

“Gods, *faster*,” Lepus cried.

The pilot said, “This is maximum speed, sir.”

A tarantula opened its wet, rasping mouth. An elephant attempted to probe at the shuttle with its bladed trunk.

“Sirs,” the pilot shouted, “do you see that?” All eyes turned on the radar panel. Ahead, submerged beneath the sandstorm, was a great hand. No, not a hand, it clearly sported a cuff—*a glove*.

Leo ordered they set down on top of it.

“But the Devas. . .” the pilot yelled.

Leo said, “We won’t lose them, whatever we do. Madeleine, set us down, hard as you like.”

The boat hit the ground, falling suddenly into a roll; the crew were thrown floor to ceiling to floor again.

Finally coming to a stop, they peered about in the gloom of electric smoke.

Someone blew the emergency bolts on the door. Desert roared in, a screaming storm of ten thousand sandy knives.

A soldier’s leg was pointing the opposite of the optimal direction. A sciencewoman was bleeding from her head.

The pilot shouted, “I’ll tend to the others. Go.”

Out into the desert and already the shuttle was almost invisible in the storm. There were just seven of them then: Theodora, Leo, Lepus, Madeleine, and a few trailing soldiers.

The sand bit their eyes, tore up their noses. Their cries were eaten in the wind.

A claw swam past, vanished. A paw groped, disappeared.

They drew their swords, electrified them, though could find nothing to strike.

From the storm came antlers then, came a black boot-polish nose.

14.

Tripping over themselves, armour clanging, they sprinted, losing track of each other, regaining, blood so loud in their ears it blocked out even the storm.

Each time the Gearheartians turned back, they caught sight of the antlers slowly advancing on them, never rushing, never dawdling, chasing for the sake of play.

Madeleine span luminously, *Quickly, this way please. I've found something.*

They came upon a vault, a stairway in the desert, just the slightest peek of light in the darkness of the storm.

"In," Lepus barked.

Theodora roared, "The soldiers and I will make our stand here."

"We're going in, damn it," Lepus shouted back.

Theodora ignored him, spinning up her vexoskeleton. Lepus leapt on her back, uncoupled her vexoskeleton harness, and pulled her down into the stairway. He called to the soldiers, "Hold them off as long as you can, then join us below."

The soldiers saluted. They spooled up their vexoskeletons and rose out of the sand to levitate on extra-dimensional legs; eyes wide, swords brandished.

15.

Leo, Lepus, and Theodora raced towards a dim light at the bottom of the stairs. Leo stopped to peer behind, and caught sight of human and Devan silhouettes embracing each other with fire and blows.

Two bejewelled antlers entered the stairway. "My friends," Mriga roared. He leapt down the steps, through Vex, through Nibbana, trying to catch Leo with a loving mouth of sharpened teeth.

Leo grabbed Mriga's haunch and screamed, pulled through fourspace and five. The stairwell exploded into its Vex equivalent, no longer steps, but Moebius loops and impossible curves.

Leo was not only falling, but ascending, dragged up into colours he could not name, through air he could not breathe. Mriga bit again and again for Leo’s face.

Lepus and Theodora climbed onto Mriga’s back, attempting to throttle him, but Mriga was too powerful, twisting his neck back and forth so no purchase could be gained.

Leo tried to yell, but his lungs were empty of threespace air and dark was coming from the corners of his eyes. He drew his baton, but Mriga only bit it to pieces.

He caught sight of Theodora, her shoulder bleeding, her foot missing. He caught sight of Lepus clutching his neck, then giving a last sigh of suffocation and falling away.

It was Leo’s turn to suffocate then.

XI

The struggle of history is not to determine more efficiently which of our stories are fiction, and which are correct interpretations of reality, but to cease telling stories entirely.

- Excerpts from **The Metaphysical Sutras of Lord Anaximander**

1.

Leo woke in a bed too small, wearing pyjamas.

No, on inspection it was *his* childhood bed and *his* childhood pyjamas.

He smacked himself a few times and the dream seemed to persist.

He opened the drawers and discovered his old toys and books in there.

Exploring, he found his parents' bedroom was just as he remembered it, Hisarya's also.

He smelled cooking and crept downstairs. Theodora and an unfamiliar man were in the kitchen, Madeleine hovering between.

The man turned to Leo with intelligent blue eyes and unkempt hair, and said warmly, "Breakfast won't be just a moment. There's coffee if you'd like some."

Leo sat at the table, too befuddled to speak. Theodora joined him and put her hand upon his. She appeared back in perfect health.

The man brought toast and Bodhi seaweed to the table and sat.

He was an admixture. He had Lepus' wild eyes and Mriga's thin face. Even his voice sounded a combination of the two men.

He sipped his coffee and said, "First I should apologise in advance for any directness or lack of feeling on my part, Leo. Given your mother's absence, I was not able to reintegrate her into my aspect, and as such am left with an overbalance of, shall we say, *lesser qualities.*"

Leo could only manage to say, "My mother?"

"Your mother." The man poured Leo some coffee. Leo pushed it away. Whisky and glasses materialised instead. "Don't do that. . ." Theodora said softly.

Leo ignored her, poured, necked, poured again. He stared about with wide, empty eyes. He said, "This house is gone."

"It was, yes," the man said. "Using a method I suppose we will get to shortly, I was able to reconstruct it via Madeleine's recollections, with her permission of course. I hoped it might make you feel at ease." He affected Lepus' rare, kind smile and winked.

People murmured beyond the window, going about the little tasks of morning. Leo said, “Are they real, the Bodhi folk?”

“No,” the man said. “It’s just us three here. And Madeleine of course.” Madeleine nuzzled up against the man and they played a little. The man’s formality seemed to fall away with ease, a child with a childhood dog. “Are you hungry, Leo?”

“No.”

“Well then, maybe some sunshine will do us good. Theodora, will you join us outside?”

“Thank you, but I’ll wait here, my lord.”

Leo went to protest, to yell *what is this bullshit*, but the man only raised a hand, said, “My name is Anaximander, and if you’re really so adamant about refusing breakfast, then let’s take a walk. I’ll gladly tell you everything.”

2.

They stepped out into the morning, Leo keeping the bottle close at his side. He looked the man over, and over again, scrutinising him for some confirmation of what he claimed.

They walked amid the crystal houses of old Serdika, of old Bodhi. Leo called to a few familiar faces, a bakingman, a schoolteacher, but they did not seem to hear him.

They passed the town hall, the council offices, the clock Ursula had built, the schoolbuilding where Pechev had decapitated the little toy ocelot almost a century ago.

The temperature was perfect, as was the general mood of the town, no one hurrying, no one sick.

The sky was a contrast, however. Leo spied the remaining boats of the Gearheart fleet above. They were swarming with Devas and fire. An enormous black sphere was expanding very slowly across the fleet.

“What is that?” Leo murmured.

“Theodora was conscientious enough to set off the *braidbomb*, as you call it, before descending to Annica.”

“Gods, will it reach us?”

“Time passes much slower here; we have the leisure of conversation a little while yet.”

They left the suburbs, passed through the aegis barrier. Anaximander walked purposefully, hacking branches, fording streams. Leo trailed behind, drawing over and over from the bottle and catching his boots in bogs.

Finally, far quicker than should have been possible, they came to what Leo knew from photographs to be the village of Hisarya. Here the folk were simpler, quieter, tending to beer kegs and horses, hauling bales of blazing purple moksha through the village square.

Leo and Anaximander passed through without being noticed, the folk here just as aloof as those in Bodhi.

Over the village boundary and into a forest then. Leo spied two figures through the trees, his father—young, his hair long and blonde—and a tall, robed bear before him.

“Mama!” Leo called. “Papa!”

He ran to them, stumbling, half-drunk, and Ursula and Johannes turned about to Leo smiling, opened their arms, and vanished.

“They are just memory remnants,” Anaximander said. “I’m sorry.”

Leo collapsed in the dirt and was grateful that at least the dirt persisted.

3.

They emerged from the forest before a cliff, a channel of water, and a glinting city in the distance.

Anaximander laid a blanket on the cliff and the two of them sat. Anaximander said, “Your mother brought your father here a very long time ago.”

“My mother. . .” Leo whispered.

“She told him my story. I wonder now if she shouldn’t have. Perhaps she might’ve returned to Phoebe as she promised and convinced the Golden Council of bivnik.”

Leo murmured, “They would never have listened.”

“Isn’t that a thing we both know too well,” Anaximander said, Lepus’ pessimism blazing out of him for a moment. “Well now. Perhaps it’s time to read you my gospel.”

“I know it.”

“No, the true version, Leo. Could I fetch you something before we begin?”

“Drink,” Leo said.

“Don’t you think you’ve drunk enough?”

“I’ll know when I’ve drunk enough.”

Leo had his new bottle from the air then and took to it lovelessly as a baby does a nipple.

Slaked at last, he laid down on the blanket.

Anaximander said, “So it was, long ago, the Myriad of Man had spread to many thousands of worlds within Samsara. . .”

4.

“So it was, long ago, the Myriad of Man had spread to many thousands of worlds within Samsara. I was born in Serdika to Lord Perun at the end of the Myriad of Man, that much of the gospel is true. It’s also true that I grew disillusioned with the pragmatic and sterile approaches of science in those times and longed to know how the world truly worked. You and I are similar in that regard. But I am not the genius the gospel depicts, and I did not go wandering in the forests and drink with troops of musicians, or wear a blue potato sack.

“When I was twenty-seven my father died suddenly, no purpose to the thing, like most deaths. I was crowned and declared the monarch. I hated being king immediately. I couldn’t stand all the fanfare and circumstance. I was nothing special, and being treated as such was a daily reminder of just how corrupt and self-serving the Myriad of Man had become. The empire was not some shining utopia, just an early try at spacefaring. Folk traded and philosophised, warred and surrendered, but the main game was as it always is with ageing civilisations: maintenance of the status quo. I was dangerously bored.

“Then, finally, something interesting happened. An exotic object was detected not far from the Myriad’s solar border, wandering aimlessly, neither natural nor artificial. Many suggested it was of *exotic* origin. As king of the Myriad of Man, it fell to me to make contact with this object. After many weeks of space travel, I arrived to find the object was even stranger than had been reported. It was not made of rock or metal, and even our best instruments could not penetrate its core.”

“Annica,” Leo said.

“Annica,” Anaximander said. “I entered the structure. I was met by many hundreds of little spyles, all innocent, all eager to greet me. Folk of my time had never seen such beings before. It took quite some time to learn their strange language of colours and spins, but when at last I did, they led me below to the heart of the planet where we talk now. I found that Annica was not a planet at all, but a repository of dreams, a semi-sentient archive. Truly, it was a living chronicle of the spyles’ history, of their early days. They showed me all of it, the grandeur of their golden days, crawling up from whatever primordial soup they had developed in, to their rise as organisms, to their spacefaring age, then to their discovery of the dimensional sciences, and the mastery of their distant home galaxy. At their peak they were almost omnipotent in their power, all-knowing and wise. Masters of space, sages of all, they ruled for millennia like that, no one dying, nothing hurting. Then, Dr Tereshkov, do you know what happened?”

Dead-eyed, Leo said, “Bivnik.”

“Bivnik,” Anaximander nodded. “Unchecked expansion, stellar plunder, entire solar systems given over to foul industry. Once the rot started, it spread quickly. The more complex a society, the more interdependent its constituent parts. Kill agriculture and industry falls. Kill industry and medicine falls. Kill medicine and governance falls, on and on until there’s no interdependence left.

“They ran from world to world, struggling for millennia. In desperation they tried to revert to the old styles of life, became agrarian again, subsistence farming and such, attempting to moderate themselves. But it was too late of course. Once a child has tried chocolate, who could convince him fruit is better? The last of their galactic reserves dwindled, and all that remained was savagery and death.

“They had come to the realisation of bivnik much, much too late. Even if they could restart some kind of galactic society, there weren’t the resources for it to thrive. For all their dimensional folding and wild technology, they could not reverse entropy. The yolk and white will not unmix, and seal back up into an egg.

“And so they did a noble thing. With the last of their resources, they decided to seek out other instances of life in the universe and try to warn them of bivnik before it was too late. Perhaps some civilisations could be saved that way. But the distances between galaxies, they are vast of course, too vast for crewed voidboats, too vast for most adding machines, one hundred thousand years even travelling close to the speed of light in Vex. The only thing to be done was to break themselves down into the most fundamental machines possible, under biology, under chemistry even, to run their minds at the level of elementary particles. And when they found particle physics couldn’t support such a thing, they used the last of their genius to modify physics itself, to build spaces of new charges; entirely new flavours and generations of particles, a system complex enough that consciousness could sit on top it without needing to appeal to the unstable dance of molecular biology. In essence they had become living matter.

“There were problems, of course. Altered, these new creatures could not quite contain all the great abstractions of their old selves. They lost old emotions. They found new emotions. I am not sure which word is correct, evolved or devolved, but in any case, they could now withstand the near-eternity of travel between the galaxies without psychologically disintegrating, albeit at the expense of their souls. And so, knowing they would likely never return to their home galaxy, they collected all of their history into a great living sphere of memory, and set off across the long black.

“They slept for tens of millennia, light-year after light-year, nothing but dust and vacuum, and they did not dream. At last they found themselves back on the shores of matter, in another galaxy. This galaxy was younger than theirs, barely out of the cradle. After much searching they found the chemical precursors of life, even microbes on occasion, but little else. They continued on.

“Next they found a galaxy much older than theirs. Many of the stars were dimming, almost dead. Here they came upon molten worlds gone

cold, ocean worlds run dry. A civilisation had been here once, judging by the technological ruins; a civilisation that had compacted whole solar systems into adding machines, had constructed great canons to shoot beings into dimensional realms above. Yet eventually bivnik had taken them all the same. If the spyles needed any confirmation that bivnik was inevitable across all cultures, across all times, this was it.

“Finally, grief-stricken, many spyles chose to disassemble, turning back into inanimate matter. Others threw themselves into suns. Only a few hundred individuals remained, the last vestiges of a once-great empire. They pushed on through the millennia with their great archive, galaxy to galaxy—some too young, some too old, many where life had simply never taken root. Then, at long last, they found a galaxy displaying clear signs of life: radio broadcasts, full stellar-energy capture, a thriving civilisation. And entering that galaxy, drawing towards the song of civilisation, they came upon a young and wayward king. They came upon me.

“I spent years inside Annica, subjectively. I relived the spyles’ history over and over; whole lifetimes as a peasant, whole lifetimes as what we might call an emperor. And each life confirmed what I was so reluctant to admit. Bivnik must be a universal pressure on all civilisations. The Myriad of Man was not exempt.

“At last I had a calling. I would be the man to stop bivnik. I would save my entire galactic civilisation from itself. How to steer the rudder of history though? The spyles were explicit: they would advise and act in a moral capacity, but their cardinal rule was that they would not interfere technologically. They still did not understand what had accelerated bivnik in their own galaxy, and suspected that providing the Myriad of Man with technical knowledge would only have the same effect.

“Well then, I would convince the worlds with words. I left Annica at once and returned with my spyle friends in tow to the prospering innards of my empire. I travelled extensively, introducing myself to my populations personally, and gave speech after speech on the inevitability of resource collapse, preaching for moderation. The worlds listened politely, then informed me that neither data nor experts were to be trusted, and might I leave them alone with their mines and starships? Each time the reaction was identical, as much a constant as bivnik.

“Twenty years of this. In the event anyone believed me, they were not influential enough to help. In the event anyone was influential enough to help, they did not believe me. Power seeks to consolidate itself, then remain static. Besides, humankind is no stranger to prophecies of doom, it is our bread and butter. How many times have we been told of the return of the great flood, or anti-rapture, only to wake the next morning and find the house still standing and the children still alive? Yet, doomsday *was* approaching. With quiet horror I knew then that the great transition in man’s history was not from illiteracy to literacy, nor from ground-bound to spacefaring, but that invisible, unremarked-of moment when the most dangerous threat to man’s existence ceased being nature, and became man himself.

“Ignored by my own empire, in desperation, I descended once again back into Annica, into the spyles’ history. Perhaps there was more to learn of their failure of moderation. And in my studying, I came across a strange titbit. Many hundreds of thousands of years ago, when the spyles had been biological, they enjoyed some curious, unnamed drug, famed not for its narcotic properties, but its *soberfication.* I was intrigued. Perhaps I could psychochemically export wisdom across the Myriad of Man, wake the population up to resource depletion.

“The base material of the drug, stoyanium-32, was only available in the coronas of stars—and by that I’m sure you know the name we call it now. It was not an easy substance to produce. Still, I had world after world of scientists and facilities at my disposable. Working on the spyles’ description of the mysterious substance, it took not even a year to obtain the star matter, then produce the drug itself. I nicknamed the substance *soma* back then. Despite the protestations of my courtiers, I was the first to try it.

“Well, you are aware of the effects; I won’t labour the point. It became quickly apparent this was far more than a narcotic; rather, some kind of higher-dimensional bridge, or mind-expanding agent, impossible to say. Even today I am not sure what its true mechanism is. In any case, I recognised its potential at once. It seemed to show the true strangeness of existence to the user, broke down the usual humdrum barriers of metaphysical satiation, quieted that part of the mind that whispers, *You are sentient meat standing on an organic spaceship; this is all perfectly normal.* The fact that it allowed sight into a fourth spatial dimension was only incidental to my purposes.

“I distributed the substance at once, first across my homeworld, then to the neighbouring planets. The reaction was immediate. Folk seemed to delight suddenly in being alive, in sentience itself. They saw themselves not just as creatures, but Universe *living* as creatures. They quit their jobs, explored, migrated. They seemed suddenly to yearn for something more substantial than trading and drink. They innovated, lamented, loved, and sang. It was marvellous and I was victorious. I was victorious!

“Then, almost as quickly as it had come on, the effect diminished. Or, folk used their ingenuity only to return to their old patterns of living, of commerce, of planetary war. The peace, the *enlightenment* had not even lasted six months. They became addicts, forever chasing their first experience with the drug, forever trying to remember what it felt like to know one is living matter. Stoyanium mining quickly became fashionable, despite my decrees banning it. The galactic population demanded more and more soma. For all of my effort, I had not only addicted my people to a new vice, but increased bivnik’s pace.

“I fell into something of a depression. I withdrew from public life. I halted in my lectures and campaigning. I remained alone for many years on the outskirts of Serdika. I drank from puddles, stole from markets. The world was dead anyway. I saw no use in preserving myself.

“One day, almost entirely famished, I came upon one of the old churches. I entered hoping a priest might take pity and offer me a little bread. The priest was elsewhere, so I perched on a prayer mat. Strange, I cannot even remember now which denomination or religion the church belonged to, but looking up at the icons and saints, I was suddenly struck by the idea that there was one approach I hadn’t used in trying to dissuade my empire from its deadly trajectory: myth.

“Science and data were making no headway in asking the galaxy to curb its consumption of stars, but why? I recalled what it was that had so disgusted me about science all those years ago. The scientific method was a project begun as an attempt to understand nature’s splendour, but finished in total defilement. We started with trying to understand the mechanics of the heavens. We concluded with pleasure cruises and little plastic drinking straws. What had gone wrong? How had we learned to unhear the cosmic music? It was all fact without wonder.

“So too I realised what had so bored me about religion. It claimed to be in the employ of truth, yet every time it was confronted with a truth it couldn’t swallow, it only stuck its fingers in its ears and sang until the problem vanished. For all its grandiosity, it seemed to consist of exactly the kinds of stories humans *would* tell themselves for comfort. It was all wonder without fact.

“There it was then. I would build a scientific religion, a religious science. I would reinvigorate man’s interest in the stars via spirituality. By chapel and telescope I would show reality in its nakedness, and convince the people of the Myriad of Man that we are but universe experiencing itself. At last we would look into the mirror of Being, and see only Universe looking back.

“We would find wonder in the imponderable majesty of the little, in all of the cells and molecules and atoms and quarks inside one’s body, the beauty of it, the *absurdity.* That is where we would apprehend the transcendent. And in finding that transcendent, we would at last realise we are but matter, and finally seek to stop conquering more matter. The way out was not up, to some holy, blazing firmament, but down, into the skin, into the quiet absurdity of being. Still though, how to spread the myth itself among my population? Well, if they would not listen to a king, perhaps they’d take note of a god.”

“As a man I had been impotent against bivnik. What if I became an idea though, the abstract manifest? I had the finest bard in the Myriad of Man concoct me a gospel, refashioning me by narrative from an inconsequential monarch and into a wiseman, an embodiment of the quest for ultimate truth. She took some liberties with the story, borrowed heavily from several ancient religions long enough dead that suspicion would not be aroused, but I felt the myth worked. Still, even with my completed gospel, I could not embody both the spiritual and scientific simultaneously. There was yet work to be done.

“By this time, many worlds in my empire had found themselves taken not only with soma’s mind-expanding capacities, but its extra-dimensional aspect also. Much to the spyles’ horror, folk were beginning to experiment with fourspace. Like children, they were learning to manipulate the world around them at will, to change themselves into strange and macabre horrors.

“I viewed this mostly as a curiosity, until one day a courtier informed me of a new practice popular among the youth: trifurcation—the cutting of one’s essence into multiple entities to live as separate things a while. Well then, I thought. What if I were to split myself into a religious wiseman, and a great scientist simultaneously? What if, together, they embodied perfect spirituality and perfect science?—fuelled by their opposition, both striving to end galactic death in their own strange ways. The religio-scientific myth would have *living, breathing* advocates.

“I could not be allowed to remember my true origin of course—I would only recombine when the trial grew difficult otherwise. Nor could I allow the spyles to interfere, else the experiment would only play out to maximum bivnik as theirs had. If galactic resource depletion was to be averted, full cosmic consciousness must be achieved. If full cosmic consciousness was to be achieved, it must be done via myth and paradigm shift. And I would be the first to take up the mantle.

“So it went then, courtesy of an early soma master, that I became a deer. The deer dreamed that death could be overcome with spirit and will. As every religious school has preached, this world is vile and imperfect, and above us must wait some golden, perfect realm we can aspire to, and one day even attain. He would save the world via the transcendent, pulling the galaxy out of resource collapse with piety.

“But I also became a bear. The bear dreamed that death could be overcome with rationality and material manipulation. The scientific method would bring salvation via perfect mathematics, via perfect physics—not up but *down*, into our bodies, into the murk of matter and spacetime, until we realised what miraculously complex creatures we are. There, the stage was set. A scientific religion was about to unleash itself upon the galaxy.

Leo said hollowly, “That accounts for Mriga and my mother, but Lepus?”

Anaximander said, “In my caution, I suspected there would be a power struggle between my two selves if they came to disagree too readily—and little did I know how bloody that power struggle would become. A balancer was required, I decided; a zeroing influence chaotic enough to keep both wills in check should one try to kill the other; a devious, amoral rabbit and his devious amoral schemes.”

Leo searched Anaximander’s face, said, “Will I see him again?”

Not kindly, not unkindly, Anaximander replied, “No.”

The deathly black of the braidbomb had filled almost a quarter of the sky, only a few maintenance vexboats managing to avoid its embrace. Devas were attempting to flee also, though judging by their already diminished numbers, the effort appeared futile.

Anaximander said, “The rest you know, of course. The religio-scientific experiment was a complete failure. I accept the blame entirely.”

Leo said, “Then I suppose I only have one question left.”

“Please.”

“Why lead us to Annica?”

“I left a single instruction behind in Annica’s mind. If over seventy percent of the galaxy was depleted of stoyanium, my trifurcated selves would be lured back here to recombine.”

“Hell, why?”

“So that if all hope was lost, I could at least watch the end as myself.”

Close to shouting, Leo said, “But that is not true. There’s still time, centuries left at least to pull us back from the brink.”

“Seventy percent of all stars are barren. There’s no return possible. As you would say on Gearheart, it is simple bivnik mechanics.” Anaximander smiled, his eyes crinkling warm with the middle of old age. “Dr Tereshkov, stopping bivnik is not a technology problem. It is not a sociological problem. It is a *wisdom* problem. And wisdom problems do not respond to data, or beatings, or mathematical formalism.”

“Then what? Damn it, what works?”

“Adulthood. Only the wisdom of adulthood. From my spyle friends I’ve heard there is evidence of millions of developing species in the cosmos, many dead, many yet to arise. Some are carbon-based, some are silicon-based, some are gaseous, others distributed across entire solar systems in vast networks of radio intelligence. But there is one thing, one singular pressure imposing upon on them all. Can they learn moderation before extincting themselves?

“It is my suspicion that the galaxies are drastically distant from one another so they can only be traversed by beings who have already overcome bivnik—by species able to contain their lust for cosmic abasement long enough to resist writing their names on the stars and selling nebulae for

advertising space—a kind of evolutionary selection pressure, if you will. Those species that give in to avarice and limitless expansion are doomed to extinction long before gaining the means to leave their galaxy or transcend to the higher-dimensional realms."

"You have proof of this?" Leo said.

"Yes. There is a plane above Vex that I have glimpsed only once. There are *creatures* of some kind who inhabit it, unknowable, unfathomable beings. I believe they are the descendants of those few civilisations who learned that dessert need not be eaten after every meal, that on some evenings only one glass of wine is ample, and that a palace may sleep not just a king, but ten thousand paupers. Heaven is only offered to species willing to behave before they get there. And we are not one of those species."

Leo stood, paced. "No," he said. "That's not right. That's not right at all." He drank. He ran his hands through his hair. He peered at Anaximander, said, "Lepus, Mama, you'd never stand for this. You'd never be told there's nothing left to try for. Are you in there? Is there anything of either of you left in there?"

Anaximander said, "I'm sorry, it's only me left now."

"Then what next, you and I just sit here in a dream and drink whisky and watch the lights go out?"

"The lights won't go out for a long while yet," Anaximander said. "We're about to enter the eighth stage of bivnik. Galactic expansion will accelerate. Thousands of new worlds will be settled. Gearheart will create even more miraculous technologies. Bodhi will become even more spiritually potent."

"Then?"

"Then both empires will eat everything. They will fall and never recover."

"And what will you do when everything's gone, when the whole galaxy has suffocated to death on its own fumes?"

"The spyles and I will leave the galaxy to search for other civilisations, trying to tell them of bivnik before it's too late. Dr Tereshkov, you are welcome to come with us. I know nothing can repair your heart, but you

will see new worlds at least, speak with strange, beautiful new creatures. I'm told it isn't so bad, becoming a spyle."

"No," Leo said. "No, thank you."

Silence. The stars. The braidbomb.

Leo screamed and threw the whisky bottle into the lake. "My father and my mother, dead. My daughter, dead. All of the wars. All of the soldiers, the scientists, the civilians, the children. Dead."

Weeping, he got down on his knees before Anaximander. He clasped his hands together. He cried, "I've come across great time and distance to find you. I've lost almost everything, and the rest I'll give away. Gearheart University is yours, everything is yours if you want it. But please, I beg you, before the worlds collapse, I *beg* you, show me just a small part of the meta-yes. Show me just a small part of the great Is. I can't die with *this* having been the world, floundering about, treading water, never seeing the coral below. Please, my lord. Venerable one. Whatever the hell it is you want me to call you. Please."

A tear fell down Anaximander's cheek. He bent to Leo's ear and said, "Dr Tereshkov, normally I would not be so blunt, but these are the final days, and only honesty is befitting. I am just a man. I never saw the meta-yes. It was but an unsuccessful myth to try to keep our species humble long enough to survive." Quieter: "I choose to believe even those enigmatic higher-dimensional creatures I spied, even the beings above *them*, have not seen Nature's true face—even they are no closer than us to understanding what reality is doing here, else they would have descended to tell the Truth in a manner we might understand, and no one would die ignorant ever again. So, whatever happens next, allow yourself to be warmed, if only for a minute, by the knowledge that not even the gods know what dirt is doing here."

Leo looked up to the familiar, unfamiliar face. To drunken Lepus. To pious Mriga. To missing Ursula.

Anaximander said, "Annica listens to some of my whims. I will ask it to stop the braidbomb explosion. I will also ask that the battle is halted, and all the Bodhi and Gearheart folk are returned without ceremony to their respective homeworlds." He put his hand on Leo's shoulder. "Dr Tereshkov, I am not a genie, but ask me for whatever you like and I will try to make it possible."

“My daughter, make her live again.”

“Even Annica cannot do that.”

“My mother?”

Anaximander shook his head.

“Gearheart then. Take me home.”

Anaximander nodded.

Leo watched the old myth collapse, starting at Anaximander’s ears, spreading inwards to his face, until finally the myth receded at the eyes and was gone as sunlight dissipates fog.

“You are just a man,” Leo said.

“I am just a man,” Anaximander said. “And this is the beginning of the end.”

5.

They hiked back to Bodhi, to the Tereshkovi house. Theodora and Madeleine were waiting in the kitchen.

Theodora and Leo exchanged a gaze beyond sadness, beyond disbelief. Leo said, “He told you all of it?”

Theodora said, “He told me all of it.”

“Will you come back with me to Gearheart? Lepus is gone, you know.”

She shook her head slowly. “Even if there’s a little of him left in this new man, I’d like to stay by his side. It sounds stupid, no?”

“No.”

She came to Leo, stood close. “I’d give anything for your mother to have lived. I tried, gods, I tried but—”

“I know it.” He whispered into her ear, “I forgive you. I should have years ago. I was spiteful and stupid, and I’m sorry.”

She took Leo’s face and kissed him on both cheeks. “Will you tell Ursula I love her? Will you take care of her? When you’re old, will you let her take care of you?”

“I will.”

Anaximander led Leo back to his childhood bedroom. Leo was so exhausted he could barely climb the stairs. Anaximander helped him into his pyjamas and into bed, then drew the covers over.

Leo felt sleep coming on immediately. Falling from consciousness, he began to cry. “I have wanted to meet you for so long.”

Anaximander knelt at his bedside, said softly, “I know.”

“I wanted you to make sense of all this. I wanted you to tell me what I’m for.”

“I know, Leo.”

“I’m so lost. Nothing has gotten better. It never will.”

“That is not true. When you wake up again, you’ll be home, on Gearheart. Madeleine will stay by your side. She will never leave you. You will drink coffee in the mornings. You will light the fireplace in the evenings. You will sit at your desk and still plan to stop bivnik, despite everything we’ve talked about. You will never give up, even at the end. You will remember your mother and your father. You will remember your daughter. More than coffee, more than the fireplace, your memories will keep you warm, even when you are old like me.”

“No. . .” Leo whispered.

“Yes,” Anaximander said. “And one day, long from now, when you are gone, Madeleine and her friends will commit everything that ever was of this galaxy to memory. They will collect up every love letter and photograph, archive every bomb crater and gravestone. They will bring it all here, to Annica, and add it to their great record. They will travel outside the galaxy once more, searching for new beginnings, for microbes huddled about a sea vent, or some developing civilisation right at the invention of the wheel. They will meet with those creatures. They will tell them of this galaxy and its desperation for eternity. They will tell them of the graves and the bomb craters. They will tell them of Ursula and Johannes and Hisarya Tereshkovi. They will tell them of you. And perhaps those distant beings will listen. Perhaps they will become one of those rare civilisations that heeds the call, that tries for moderation, and, much later, gains eternity as a reward.”

“Anaximander. . .”

“Goodnight, Leo. I wish you the very, very pleasantest of dreams.”

XII

Science did not kill magic. Yes, we've had to dispense with spells and incantations. Yes, the universe is more apathetic than previously supposed. But in return for accepting these losses, we have gained a picture of the world so unfathomably beautiful and mysterious that if God truly existed, He Himself could not fathom it.

- Excerpts from **The Empirical Sutras of Lady Ursula**

1.

The dams of Gearheart had been left to break long ago and the world was an ocean now.

The ocean was almost always engaged in a storm and the waves were very high and fierce.

The only object to escape the ocean was Scholar’s Tower. It protruded from the ocean with just a modest tip, the majority of its bulk in the salty water below.

Many thousands of rooms slept dormant and flooded beneath the water—old chalkboards rinsed clean by the sea, old experiments and smashed beakers floating about in chambers gone to dead aquariums.

It was on a night of dreadful thunder and lightning that a vexboat appeared from fourspace and set itself down in the water.

A woman emerged, hidden beneath a cloak. The woman threw out a tether and pulled her vexboat towards Scholar’s Tower until the two were mated.

She began to ascend the many steps that wound about the outside of the tower, pausing here and there to look in on disused banquet rooms and meeting chambers.

Old and broken chairs. Parchment torn and scattered. A teddy bear in an empty fireplace.

Finally, the spire.

A circular metal door awaited the woman. She closed her eyes for a moment, seeking peace.

She found none.

She gestured at the door and it rolled aside.

A spyle and a blonde woman of perhaps fifty were waiting at the door’s threshold.

What are you doing here? the spyle span.

Hisarya bowed. It appeared more exhaustion from keeping her head up than a ritual of religion. She said weakly, “I’ve come to talk. Please just let

me speak my piece and then I'll be gone."

Only the storm replied, the night lit with camera flash lightning.

Hisarya raised her eyes slowly to the blonde woman. "You are Lepus' daughter, Ursula?"

Thunder rang out. The woman said nothing.

Raindrops fell from Hisarya's hair and into her eyes, then down her cheeks. She bowed again. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

She turned about for the tower steps, her cloak crying with rain.

Ursula called out, "If this is a trick—"

"It's not a trick," Hisarya said.

"We have an entire phalanx of soldiers waiting in here, all of them fourspace-ready."

"It's not a trick, I swear it. I swear it, please."

Hisarya turned back around, blonde straggles of wet hair over her eyes, her robe in a sopping swaddle at her feet. She lowered herself slowly and prostrated in the rain. She drew so close to the floor she could kiss the metal.

The metal was odourless and cold on her face and for one perfect moment it was the only sensation in her mind.

She remained still. The door refused to close, dutifully waiting with an infrared eye for her to leave so it might roll aside and forget her forever.

When she looked up, Ursula was standing over her. Ursula said, "You try anything and you're dead."

Hisarya presented her hand. "Take my blood, test whatever you want. I've no moksha in me, I've had it all removed surgically. Please."

Ursula said, "Where's your crown, Empress?"

"I've none."

"And where are your paws and fur?"

Hisarya shook her head.

Ursula took Hisarya's hand and drew her inside. She towelled Hisarya's hair and face. She fetched a thick robe and wrapped it about her.
Then Ursula and Madeleine led her down the corridor to a great hall.

Everything was either smashed or bent or broken, old statues gone to jagged marble, paper gone to scraps.

Madeleine guided Hisarya to a futon and brought a hot drink that smelled of chocolate. Hisarya said, “I can’t possibly—”

Ursula said, “Drink it and shut up.”

Hisarya drank the contents in just a few gulps and gave the cup back.

Thunder rang out again and Hisarya jumped.

Ursula said, “It’s a storm, Empress. Don’t you have those above your palace sometimes?”

“I have no palace.”

Ursula said quietly, “They say Bodhi’s gone, just ruins.” Hisarya nodded. “And your congregation, all the others?”

“Dead. . .” Hisarya whispered. When she was dry and the colour had returned to her face, she looked about and said in a little voice, “Where are the soldiers? Where are the scholars?”

Ursula muttered, “It’s just us here.” She scrutinized Hisarya with a mixture of contempt and jealousy. She looked around twenty still, her complexion pale, her eyes wrinkleless, though with heavy, tired black bags beneath. Ursula said, “It’s been two hundred years since Annica. What are you doing here?”

“I would like to see my brother.”

“Why now?”

“Because I heard he was unwell, and I have nothing else left in the galaxy.”

“Nothing else that’s yours, you mean.” Ursula hand-gestured to Madeleine: *Is the radar clean, darling?*

Nothing nearby in threespace or four.

Do you think it’s a trap?

Madeleine span a maudlin purple. *Does it matter now?*

Formally Ursula said, “Where have you been all this time?”

Hisarya sank into the futon. “To the edges of the galaxy, then to the centre.”

“What’s at the centre?”

“Gravity and a big, dark hole. I stayed there a while and just watched. I saw whole solar systems falling in. You know, they get to the lip of the

black hole, and just as they're about to fall inside, they stop. They freeze like insects in amber. . ."

"Poetic," Ursula muttered. "And what? You had some big family revelation? Bodhi gone, Gearheart gone, time to come and say goodbye before *the* Big Goodbye?"

"No. . . I don't know." Hisarya peered up. "Are the Gearheart worlds gone?"

Ursula deliberated a moment, then nodded to Madeleine. Madeleine exploded into a star map, a dead atlas of orange and yellow stars, just a few speckled patches of vital purple left.

Ursula pointed. "Lovelace went barren first. The refugees migrated to Brunell. Brunell went barren and the refugees all flocked to Yann's World. On and on and on, further out to the galactic edge."

"Are there worlds alive near the edge?"

"Plenty. They're gulping up all the stoyanium they can, last party before the lights go out."

"How long before. . ."

Seventy years at most, Madeleine span. *Then the final collapse will begin.*

Hisarya caught a tear. Another came. Another.

Ursula pretended not to notice.

Hisarya whispered, "I tried going beyond the rim years ago, maybe to Andromeda, I don't know, just another galaxy. I got six months out there. That's all I could take, six months. It's so dark, and so quiet. . ."

Ursula collected firewood and filled the fireplace and soon the room was warmer. She muttered, "The last scholars left Gearheart about fifty years ago. We haven't had visitors since. I've been dreaming of more company. Funny that it had to be you."

Hisarya said, "Are you both just. . . waiting for the end?"

Ursula glanced at Madeleine. Madeleine span, *It makes no difference now. We may as well just tell her.*

Ursula lit the hall's main lights. The far end was all stacks of books and papers, then statues, artefacts, portraits, and hundreds of complex metal instruments Hisarya didn't recognise. She said, "You're going to burn it all?"

Ursula chuckled darkly. "We aren't tyrants like you, Empress. It's for preservation."

Hisarya caught sight of spyles between the books and artefacts, exploded to dust, wrapping themselves about everything.

Ursula said, "They're committing it all to memory, the remains of Gearheart, our history. Literature, poetry, anthropology, sociology, physics, engineering, all of it. We spent twenty years scouring the planet before the dams broke just looking for the right memorabilia."

"The spyles are leaving?"

"Yes. A few years from now when everything's memorised, when they're sure they've got enough. Madeleine and her friends already have an eye on a galaxy a few million light-years away."

Hisarya murmured, "I hope nothing of Bodhi goes with them."

"Everything of Bodhi goes with them. Your legacy especially, Empress. The collapse couldn't have happened without your help. We have plenty of portraits of you, plenty of audio tablets of the last days of the worlds you helped to destroy. In a way, this entire cache is one long, glorious history of Bodhi. Isn't that fine? Isn't that noble?"

"Yes."

"Toys belonging to dead children, wedding rings belonging to dead wives and husbands, just think of it, your legacy stretching across time. Just think of it, never dying, all that blood bequeathed to some other civilisation out there. All that—"

Madeleine span, *Ursula. . .*

Ursula calmed a little. "Well," she said, "things won't be forgotten anyway. Empress, why have you come here, really?"

"If he's alive, I want to speak to him. If he's dead, at least show me to his grave. Please. Please can you just do that." She got onto her knees to prostrate, but Ursula caught her by the shoulder.

"No, don't bow. We're equals on Gearheart, even if only a few of us are left. We'll preserve that virtue until everything's gone. Wait here."

3.

Ursula returned with a hunched man on her arm. Each placed foot looked like it would collapse under him.

His hair was white and his skin was more creases than anything, his eyes puddle-water. He kept stopping to touch the slates and books, and Ursula gently cooed that they keep walking.

She sat him down beside Hisarya and said, “Do you need anything? Tea, anything at all?”

“I. . .” His milky pupils whirled. He offered a cupped hand. Begrudgingly, Ursula poured a whisky and balanced the glass in his palm. He drank, grunting as he swallowed.

Hisarya put her hand on the man’s shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice her. She said softly, “Leo.”

He turned to her with a vacant smile, as though amused by some private joke.

“It’s me, Leo.” She took his hand. It was warped with arthritis and very cold. “It’s Hisarya.”

Leo frowned. He said, “Yes, yes. . . but we haven’t the plan, haven’t the will, nor chairs, nor cups. . .”

“I’ve come to say some things I should have said a very, very long time ago.”

“One by two, by four, by eight,” Leo said. “Whence came the hand?”

He held the glass out again. Ursula poured again.

Hisarya said quietly, “Should he be having that?”

Ursula said, “More won’t hurt at this point.” She gave Hisarya the bottle. “We’ll be in the next room.”

She made for the door. Madeleine hesitated a moment, then followed after.

When they were gone, Hisarya whispered, “Leo.”

“Leo,” Leo said.

He whimpered and clutched his leg, spilling whisky down himself.

“Are you all right?” she said. “Does something hurt?”

“Hurt,” he said. Then with a smile, as though fascinated by the sound of the word rather than the meaning: “Hurt, hurt, hurt, hurt—”

“Hey,” she said. “Come on now.”

“Come on now.”

She moved closer. His smell was distinct, the individual scents impossible to name, but unmistakably: *old man*. She put her hand on his shoulder again and could feel the harsh ridges of his skeleton covered with just an afterthought of skin and muscle.

She pointed to the dome above, to the night sky. She said, “Do you remember, Leo?”

“Leo.”

“Do you remember, all your worlds? All my worlds?”

“Two by four by eight by sixteen—”

“We played king and queen, didn’t we? Do you remember?”

Nothing.

She kissed his hand. “I went out beyond the stars, Leo. I left the galaxy a while. I looked back and everything I’d ever known was just trailing behind. I got so far that our whole galaxy turned into just a little speck of light.”

“Into just a little speck. . .”

“And then I came back. I watched stars being born in five dimensions. I watched babies being born on the outer worlds, watched them all trying to keep the flame alive. Gods, they tried so hard, farming until the ground just turned to dust. And even then they didn’t give up. They squeezed water from the air and gave it all to their children. They just kept going; they wouldn’t stop. And when they stopped, I watched that too. I watched them all lay down and turn into bones.” She let out a small whimper and Leo patted her knee.

“There, there,” he said. “There, there, there, there, there.”

“Then I left Nibbana, left Vex.” She presented her hands. “Aren’t they better without claws?”

“Claws,” Leo said.

She took a little urn from her robe. She offered it to him. “This is for you to keep. It’s Mama and Papa. There is nothing I can say that will fix all

this, but I’m trying.” She whispered, “Do you hear me? I’m trying.”

Leo stroked the urn disinterestedly and turned back to stare into the air.

“Leo,” she whispered. “It’s Hisarya. I’ve come to see you one last time. There is so much I have to say.”

He searched her face again. He studied her brow, her nose.

His eyes focused suddenly. He affected a great smile and looked into her eyes and his mouth opened wide, gleeful with the ecstasy of recognition.

“Marta,” he said.

“Hisarya,” she said.

He took her face in his hands. “Marta,” he whispered and kissed her on both cheeks. “I’ve missed you ever so. . .”

“Leo, it’s Hisarya.”

He embraced her and she felt his hot tears glide down her cheek. “Marta,” he whispered. “Oh, I’ve missed you ever so. . .”

Hisarya looked at the pain and tried to observe it until it faded. It only seemed to grow more strident at the pleasure of being watched.

She felt the cold of the urn between them, pressed to their hearts. She tried to cry and found her eyes had no more tears in them.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s me, Papa. It’s Marta.”

Leo cried harder then, holding her close with his disfigured hands. She laid against his shoulder and he stroked her hair. “Oh. . .” he murmured.

Thunder rang out through the tower. A flash of lightning burned every smashed plate and cigarette butt star white for a moment as though sterile and perfect.

Hisarya reached for her robe again and brought out a ream of old parchment. She said, “Shall I read you a story? Would you like that?”

“Mm. . .” he said.

“Just let me read you a story.”

“A story.”

“A story to send you to sleep.”

“To sleep,” he murmured.

She unfurled the parchment. Leo closed his eyes.

There, through the skylight, through the inexhaustible storm, Hisarya caught a flicker of purple in the night.

The lightning struck out again. The thunder followed faithfully after, waiting once again for the lightning.

She heard the faint noises of sleep coming from Leo.

She set his glass down on the floor. She took his hand. She whispered, “Shall I read you a story?”

His hand twitched slightly, perhaps a dream.

Or, she thought, she hoped, perhaps to check her hand had not left his.

And ever so quietly, she began to read.

Geometry for Ocelots *by Leo Tereshkov (eleven and three-quarter years old)*

There was once a lonely ocelot lost in the forest.

Where were her mama and papa?

Where was her brother?

Afterword, or, Why This Nonsense Got Written

This story started with a feeling and I'd like to tell you about it.

I've never been terribly into history. It just seemed like dead people's baggage, really – this king got bashed in by this relative, and so on. But even in my lazy glances over Wikipedia, I started noticing a rather alarming pattern, regardless of time or geography.

An oppressive regime oppresses its people. Some of the people grow sufficiently pissed off. Said people form a revolutionary movement standing for all manner of noble qualities; liberation, love, etc. Sometimes they overthrow the regime and assume power themselves. And within just a few short years, those revolutionaries are suddenly executing and oppressing the people, just like their predecessors. The uniforms are new, but the blood flows all the same.

I assumed that this amateur "revelation" was borne of not knowing much about history, until one day a few years ago I visited the Bulgarian village of Koprivshtitsa. Koprivshtitsa was the birthplace of most of the first wave of the Bulgarian revolutionaries. Bulgaria had been under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for about five centuries and, as you can imagine, throwing off Ottoman rule is still considered a huge moment in Bulgarian history.

Anyway, I was pretty curious to find out who these revolutionaries were. I discovered in my foreign ignorance that most of the Koprivshtitsa revolutionaries had ended up executed for their trouble. And, in Koprivshtitsa today, you can walk through the revolutionaries' houses, see their bedrooms, read their letters, all the while knowing that just a few years after sleeping in those beds and writing those letters, most of them would be killed. It was tragic for sure, but nothing I hadn't heard before.

Then, as I was about to leave the village, I noticed a plaque explaining that this particular wave of revolutionaries hadn't actually been successful.

Instead, they'd inspired the next wave of revolutionaries who'd finally throw off the Ottoman rule.

I just couldn't believe that. The Koprivshtitsa revolutionaries had devoted their lives to this thing, and their lives had been taken for this thing, and it *still* hadn't worked. I imagined trying to explain to them that though their sacrifice would always be remembered, though their struggle was vital, change would take a long time yet. *Sorry guys.*

It all seemed so tragic and futile. And I started thinking about what a wiggly, perilous road history is. I realized three things then. 1. I was hardly the first to stumble on "wow, history is, like, sO wEiRd!!!!!!!!!" 2. The futile winding road of history wasn't just limited to nations. Our own lives play out in exactly the same higgledy, tragic fashion. And 3. If I was very lucky, I might just have a story idea.

Anyway, the Bulgarian epic doesn't end there. The country finally achieved independence from the Ottomans in 1878, and Bulgaria went on to enjoy years of self-determination. Two world wars later however and that self-determination was gone again. Bulgaria became a satellite state of the Soviet Union. (I've met some older Bulgarians who seemed to quite like living under communism, I don't want to knock that period – especially as a foreigner – but still, Bulgaria's independence was gone once more.)

Again, I tried to imagine talking to the revolutionaries of Koprivshtitsa, explaining to them that not only would the revolution take a while, but after the revolution there would *another* regime swooping in, determining the protocols of rule and education and free association and whatever else, like choosing the cup the ball is under and getting it right, only for the swindler to shuffle the cups again.

Nevertheless, Bulgaria finally shook itself free of the Soviet Union along with a number of its neighbours in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet project collapsed. There are still problems here. Depending on who you talk to you will receive a very different list of problems, but if there's one thing that all Bulgarians agree on, it's that things could be better

politically. Still, Bulgaria at last seems to have self-determination again after over five centuries.

I don’t know what the revolutionaries of Koprivshtitsa would make of their beloved Bulgaria today— though I like it very much. What I do know is that they might be surprised by just how steep the path was to climb from subjugation to liberation, and how many missteps and tumbles back down the stairs there would be on the way. For them, revolution was just around the corner. Little did they know it would be many more very perilous corners yet.

Almost every country, almost every enterprise seems to play out the same way. Desire gives way to vision. Vision gives way to action. Action is smacked in the face and told to shut up; over, and over, and over. Long years of hardship endure, then suddenly, out of the mist, a good turn. Or a bad turn. Or no turn. And there’s no pattern or justice to it.

Exactly the same anti-pattern plays out in our lives. We go to a party after years of romantic disappointment, finally jaded enough to stop looking, only to meet our future husbands or wives. Or, we are blissfully wandering about in the ecstasy of love, only to lose our partners to disinterest or disease. There is no logic to it, as desperately as we try to devise some.

If I could sum up how I felt reading that plaque in Koprivshtitsa, learning that the revolutionaries I’d spent a few days learning about and coming to admire had failed in what must be one of the bravest human struggles it is that: History is drunk.

History is not literature, not cinema, and humans are not archetypes or purposed agents within history. We live for strange self-assigned reasons, or strange reasons assigned from on high by those more powerful than us. We die sometimes for stupid reasons or no reason. The world may be a story, but the plot delivers no catharsis, and the moral the story is trying to get across is far from obvious.

I think we like telling stories because for as long as we listen to them, we can forget that the world is harsh and unpredictable, and that history is

driving heavily, *heavily* under the influence. And maybe it's trying to drive somewhere with good intentions, but more often than not, falls asleep and swerves into an orphanage. Our respective nation's histories are no different. Our personal histories are no different.

But here we are. Now. And while life is harsh and history is drunk, just as the revolutionaries of little Koprivshtitsa stood in league with each other against the approaching dark days, well, why the hell can't we?

We're still in the naive early decades of the twenty-first century and dark clouds are coming down the mountain for our little village. Transnational corporations above the law, mass digital misinformation, another pandemic (perhaps even harsher than the one currently ravaging the world), even worse food shortages in developing countries, another global war, environmental collapse, and so on.

Maybe some of those things will come to pass. Maybe, blessedly, none of those things will come to pass. But it is currently 2021, and as it stands today, we do have a planet left. And we do have a civil digital landscape left. And we do have a global community left.

For every dickhead on Twitter, there are ten thankless, good people in the real world quietly going about their lives, quietly trying to be kind. For all of history's cruelty, for all the cruelty of the universe and its apathy and its trials, kindness is alive and well. If you haven't seen it so much recently, well I have. It's real and it's abundant and it's one of the many light corners of the human condition that cannot be killed. (And you will not find it on Twitter. Please stop looking for it on Twitter.)

If we stand up for that kindness, if we use this century to amplify that kindness, if we vow to protect the delicate, hard-won victories we've been given by our ancestors, of democracy, of human rights, of goodness just for the sake of goodness, if we make an effort not to ruin the fucking atmosphere—then even if history drives drunk right into all of our projects and hopes, I believe that future generations will look back on us with gratitude that we stood our ground for our love of the delicate marble we live on; that we did the hard, *right* thing in a time when it would've been

infinitely easier not to. And doing that hard, right thing isn't just going to take cleverness, but compassion. The engine of history isn't progress; it's kindness. Thankless, quiet, everyday, mortal kindness.

We don't seem to dream of a better world much anymore. We were burned so many times by utopian thinking last century that even utopia is a dirty word now. But we must, must, must start dreaming again, dreaming wide and big of a society where no one is trodden on and everyone can eat. Our dignity relies on it. Our descendants will rely on it. Don't listen to these miserable, jaded fucks who insist that the indignities and inequalities of the current world are just necessary evils. These same bastards would've tried to keep feudalism around not a half-millennium ago.

Bolstered by doomsday weapons and an internet that can no longer agree on a consensus narrative regarding just about anything, the 2020s may well be the defining decade of our species. As in, this could well be make-or-break time. And if you are being told again and again that humans have to starve to keep the machine going, that the current indignities are just a necessary quirk of the system, that we will only survive if we preserve the status quo, then I would like to leave you with a paraphrasing of something my hero Ursula K. Le Guin said in a speech shortly before she died:

The reaches of the current system may seem inescapable at the moment. Well so was the divine rite of kings not too long ago.

History has already happened. We can't do a damn thing about it. But we can be better. God, we can be better. I believe, as I hope you do, in a time one day—a while from now, but still attainably close—when the curses of poverty, misery, and death will seem as pointlessly tragic and avoidable as scurvy.

There is a long way to go yet, but we can get there. *We can fucking get there.* And it will be an honour to get there with you, or at least continue the brave walk towards adulthood our ancestors began millennia ago.

Good luck out there and much, much love.

Here come the wild twenties. See you on the other side.

exurb1a

P.S –

Above all I would like to thank й for every night I phoned her panicking about how I couldn’t finish this thing, and how every single one of those nights, without fail, she talked me back down with kindness and love and patience, and told me to just keep going.

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And finally, I would like to thank *you* for even bothering with this story in the first place. It means the world, and I’m very, very grateful indeed.

exurb1a runs a YouTube channel of the same name, centred around philosophy, theoretical physics, and poor attempts at humour. He has also written a book of short stories you might like called The Bridge to Lucy Dunne, and three novels: The Prince of Milk, Logic Beach: Part I, and The Fifth Science.

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